MANOHLA DARGIS

CounterCurrents

Love Me Gender

NEW YORK

Sex. For six packed September evenings at Millennium, 12 programs of films that both realize and remember unabashed, unleashed polymorphous sexuality were shown, part of the Second New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival. Sexuality that, in the wake of AIDS, refuses to take a cold shower, affirming once again that the politicization of the personal is imperative.

"I'm in a conscious reality I can't transcend," says the self-proclaimed transgendered Albert Michael Weber/Sabina in Robert Gates and Lynn Wyatt's *Communication From Weber* (1988). Releasing a torrent of homilies, memories, and reflections, Weber/Sabina is the loquacious center of this portrait of a divided self. ("Half of me is always hidden, is suffering.") *Communication* includes both lurid color footage of Sabina in a Roger Corman cheapie and a cinema vérité record of Weber/Sabina at home in a room papered with photos, cartoons, diagrams, legends, graffiti. Standing amid this clutter, Weber asks, "You want to prove I have the other stuff underneath?" Then, remarking that this is "the entire story of the entire day," Weber pulls aside his shirt and pants to reveal Sabina's slip and stockings, voicing a desire to shave her legs: "If I decide, it's not sexist."

Michael Wallin's *Decodings* is a profoundly moving, allegorical search for identity from the documents of collective memory, in this case found footage from the '40s and '50s. Wallin unfolds his parable at a steady, voluptuous pace that is anathema to the compulsion toward hyperkinesis frequently employed with films using found footage. A solitary figure follows a mystical beam of light from above; a sonorous voiceover intones that "danger is not a story for the timid." Tales of wandering and searching are set to images of young boys boxing, praying, playing. Men perform feats of danger and abandon: One dives into water from an impossibly high cliff, another drives through a ring of fire. "The world is full of miracles. We stand up, we lie down, chew, swallow. It seems only natural." The search for self ends in aching poignancy with stills of a boy and his mother at the kitchen table, catching the moment that marks the dawning of anguish and loss; desire becomes imprinted on that which was long ago.

The last film screened at the festival was Wallin's 1975 sexually explicit, erotic meditation on his relationship with a boyfriend, *The Place Between Our Bodies*, a significant declaration against the assault on gay sexuality in the wake of AIDS. A point effectively honed in Jerry Tartaglia's potent, angry *A.I.D.S.C.R.E.A.M.*, in which ominous incantations ("AIDS is the excuse to desexualize gay culture.... Four out of five doctors recommend no sex for gay men.... Good gays are monogamous and straight-looking....") are juxtaposed with images of men, the voice shockingly revealing that "these are my friends, my dead friends." And, although the paucity of strong new films by women was acutely disappointing, there was the premiere of Barbara

Continued on next page

Wild in the streets: Krishna/Chaipau (Shafiq Syed)

Harried Krishna

BY KATHERINE DIECKMANN

SALAAM BOMBAY! Directed and produced by Mira Nair. Written by Sooni Taraporevala. From a story by Nair and Taraporevala. Released by Cinecom. At the Lincoln Plaza, opening October 9.

Smoothly blending the disquieting grit of *Pixote* with the reassuring sentiment of *Oliver!*, *Salaam Bombay!* makes comprehensible to Western eyes the clamorous, layered slums of Bombay and the plight of its street children. The film reveals the split nature of its maker, the talented Mira Nair, an Indian who came to the states to study at Harvard and directed four India-related documentaries prior to *Bombay!*, her feature debut. Nair's conventional shooting style and accessible plot may offend purists who seek a more "authentic" India—but the fact remains that this fluid, engaging movie will correct dominant retro-raja visions and no

FILM

doubt will prove a bigger draw than even the most popular Satyajit Ray film.

Nair's story is simple: An abandoned boy named Krishna, or Chaipau (Shafiq Syed), spends his days carrying precarious tea trays up and down spiral staircases in Bombay's labyrinthian alleys, sleeping in the streets with other homeless children at night. Banished by his mother, the adorable and fair-minded Krishna is saving up to return home. His world is populated by a roster of down-in-the-gutter types—a boorish pimp and druglord, Baba (Nana Patekar); Baba's junked-out minion, Chillum (Raghubir Yadav); a needy little girl, Manju (Hansa Vithal), whose family life suggests Krishna may not be missing much; and a naïve virgin, "Sweet 16" (Chanda Sharma), sold into prostitution, whom Krishna falls for with all the unreflected passion of first love. Nair weaves her elements skillfully; Chillum's OD death (and the haunting street funeral that follows) creates a narrative hole soon filled by an extended sequence at a government-run children's camp.

Salaam, Bombay! is most gratifying when Nair draws on her documentary background to bring her film vérité life—like in a movie house scene, when the rowdy street kids ape a tacky, voluptuous screen idol, or in the truthful depiction of hash smoking and petty crime. The director-producer's feel for Bombay life is textural enough to propel the movie. We don't need the numerous, doleful close-ups and extended shots of wide-eyed faces, especially not at the film's conclusion, which Nair no doubt means to be stark, but which read instead like one of those world hunger magazine ads that dare you to turn the page. ■

KATHLEEN COLLINS, 1942-88

Kathleen Collins was an author, filmmaker, and playwright. For much of her life in New York City, she worked as a film editor and professor of film theory and production at City College. She was best known for her plays, which were produced at the Richard Allen Center and the American Place Theatre, and three motion pictures, *The Cruz Brothers and Mrs. Malloy* (1980), *Losing Ground* (1982), and *Gouldtown* (1986). "I am more a writer than I am a filmmaker. My first commitment is to writing," she once said. At the time of her death from cancer on September 18, Collins was working to finish a novel and was beginning preproduction work on her next dramatic feature.

So much of what I have to say is bound up in grief—other people's grief as well as my own, an obstacle that deters me from speaking on Kathy's passing. I recognize the obligatory silence that fell over me when I was told of her death as something other than the self-indulgent withdrawal associated with grief. Still it is something mournful. Sad, in the blanketing way that sadness oversaturates the death of the unformed or partly finished. A mournful sorrow that hasn't the time or the patience for grief.

I met Kathleen Collins in 1983 at a film festival held at Howard University. She had come to exhibit *Losing Ground*, the movie she and Ronald Gray had produced together.

"Who's the projectionist?" she asked.

I looked around blankly like everyone else, before collecting my wits to croak out, "I am."

She smiled. Magical thing, her smile. It began on her face and moved through her whole body until it seemed that all of her smiled. I wondered if this was what kept me from being uncomfortable when a perfect stranger began telling me what to do. I had more opportunity to ponder this during her next visit to Washington. Director and Howard University film professor Haile Gerima shuttled us all away to one of his mandatory Ethiopian dinners. There he chided me my infatuated state, saying, "He's jealous if anybody sits next to you, Kathy." She paused and gave me a quizzical look. Then she smiled.

"Come sit next to me, William," she said, making room for me on her right. I sat perched in a near-nirvanic state.

Months later, fortunately, I lost that doe-eyed sense of wonder. I became more acquainted with the woman I idolized. As with any of one's heroes, it's more rewarding to see the woman for who she is, especially Kathy, who hated "mythologizing" people and who, in her own words, rejected the notion of being either "saint" or "sinner."

Her work and her presence were a challenge. As a filmmaker, I gauged my own development, to some extent, by asking, "Would I dare show this work to Kathy?" and "Would I feel pleased calling it my own when she saw it?" She refused to be caught up in the labeling of "art," insisting instead on an excellence of craft. She maintained a keen ear for criticism, which only strengthened what she rightfully called "an obsession."

Finished films, plays, or novels can always be retrieved for reading or viewing, but the woman who made them is not so rudely packed away or relegated to repertoire. I feel her absence and find few immediate ways to explain it. It was Kathy's feeling "that all illness is psychic disconnection of some kind." If this holds true, then the illness that took Kathleen Collins is as much a part of one's connection to her as it was the end of her personal struggle.

Kathy was concerned that people understood where she stood as an author. In a 1986 interview with David Nicholson, she said, "You don't get the resolution, but you get the explosive moment. After that, the resolution is not your business. In all my work, I take you to the explosive moment, but that's basically where I leave you."

—William Hudson

Guys and dolls: Ahwesh's *Ode to the New Prehistory*

Continued from preceding page
Hammer's *Endangered*, a visceral investigation into the perilous existence of endangered species, including footage of the filmmaker herself working an optical printer.

Last week, the Collective showed a group of recent films distributed by the nonprofit Parabola Arts Foundation. Peggy Ahwesh's Super-8 epic, *Ode to the New Prehistory*, is a starkly articulated archaeology of violence, its public face expressed through images of soldiers, street riots, the Berlin Wall, Goya's *Disasters of War* etchings, and a subterranean lecture on nuclear holocaust. Against these shots, Ahwesh sets scenes of private, unsensational violence that betray the fragility of human relations. A static camera unflinchingly records how a woman and a man's bedroom wrestling tests the borders between intimacy and violation, play and power. Later, a fluid, hand-held camera records the registers of children's violence, as a prepubescent boy precisely details the intricacies of modern warfare technology. The exegesis placidly continues as two screaming little girls maneuver into center screen to repeatedly pound each of his shoulders with Cabbage Patch dolls.

Childhood terrors of a different sort are explored in Phil Solomon's *The Secret Garden*, a dense, intricate reworking of found and original footage. Solomon manipulates the film's surface to create flashes, streaks, splotches, and a shimmering patina of black that threatens to obliterate the fantastic, Technicolor images of childhood from the celluloid versions of *The Secret Garden* and *The Wizard of Oz*. Images like vague and distant memories on the verge of dissolution. Memories like the stories of Oz and the secret garden, reworked, retold, reimagined again and again through the obscuring veils of the past. ■

HOBERMAN

Continued from page 61
after he swindled his countryman out of half a million DM, and the guy dropped a dime to Simon Wiesenthal. (After Barbie's cover was blown, he tried to make the best of it by charging for interviews in which he protested his innocence.) Barbie was a prize package—which may be why half the German and American interviewees are positioned beneath gaily decorated Christmas trees.

Filming in Germany, from where his family fled when the filmmaker was six, Ophuls can barely contain his disgust—documenting the Munich winter carnival and underscoring every other scene with Christmas carols or sprightly Bavarian kitsch ("I'm not made of wood, and I don't have a wooden heart"). With the introduction of the CIC, *Hotel Terminus* becomes almost lighthearted. Ophuls opens this movement with a clip from a Keystone Kops short, then uses an optimistic ditty from *Swingtime* to construct a little German-American reconciliation montage—complete with the Reagans at Bergen-Belsen.

The précis for a Balzac cycle, *Hotel Terminus* swarms with remarkable characters, ranging from the gnomish ex-president of Bolivia to a fantastically anxious former employee of the CIC. ("Will this be shown in Germany?" he pathetically asks.) Nazi-hunter Serge Klarsfeld comes across as a kind of continental Continental Op while, in Hammett terms, his wife is more of a glamorous Brigid O'Shaughnessy. The onetime ratline operator who helped spirit Barbie out of Europe sits in his apartment at Washington's Watergate complex and rants about Jews who persecute Nazis by fabricating crimes and blaming innocent people; a German cop, gone to Peru to make his fortune, complains about Marxist police trained in Cuba; Barbie's showboat lawyer, the sometime leftist Jacques Vergès, wonders why his client's atrocities were worse than those perpetrated by the French in Algeria.

Watching *Hotel Terminus*, I understood why some Ophuls fans (if not Ophuls himself) were uncomfortable with Lanzmann's forceful interviewing technique. Lanzmann came on like a barely controlled Jeremiah, while the Ophuls of *The Sorrow and the Pity* was an archetypal diaspora Jew—diffident, oblique, ironic. Lanzmann "never tries to ingratiate himself with the audience," Ophuls wrote approvingly, and clearly *Shoah* has given Ophuls leave to be more aggressive—or, at least, more persistent. (In a recent issue of *American Film*, he compares himself to Peter Falk's Columbo.) Ophuls not only browbeats a few interviewees, while satirizing those who won't speak to him, but also shows his crew chased away from Barbie's Catholic alma mater, ordered off an old SS man's land ("what ever happened to human rights?" the owner wants to know), and even shoved around while attempting to film Barbie's La Paz apartment.

Ophuls is also more determined to expose the persistence of European anti-Semitism than in previous films. Two French interviewees casually dismiss *Night and Fog* as "propaganda," and as one Auschwitz survivor describes Barbie flipping out and beating her up in front of her parents, Ophuls cuts to a French nationalist linking Waldheim's victory to a pro-Barbie backlash. (*Hotel Terminus* was produced without French funding. Ophuls, in an apparent gesture of despair, dedicates it to the one person who made a disinterested gesture of help to one of Barbie's victims.)

Words often fail. While the Lima businessman recalls Barbie's anti-Semitism, his former CIC control cautiously allows that Barbie was "certainly not *pro*-Semitic." Like Orwell, Ophuls suggests that moral emptiness involves the debasement of language: When the old wraith is finally brought smirking to bay, he tells a French TV interviewer that "the word 'Nazi' doesn't exist." ■

"THE FUNNIEST HORROR LAMPOON SINCE MEL BROOKS' 'YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN'."
—GLENN LOVELL, SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS

"*ELVIRA*, A MODERN DAY MAE WEST."
—VILLAGE VOICE

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Wed. Oct. 12
6:00 **Arnulf Reiner** by Peter Kubelka (1958-60). **Films of Auguste and Louis Lumière** (1895-1900)
7:00 **A Study in Choreography For Camera** by Maya Deren (1945). **The Art of Vision** by Stan Brakhage (1965)
8:30 **Seven Women–Seven Sins** Premiere (1986)

Thurs. Oct. 13
6:00 & 8:30 **Films of Auguste and Louis Lumière** (1895-1900)
8:00 & 10:15 **Seven Women–Seven Sins** (1986)
10:30 Essential Cinema #1: **Films by Kenneth Anger: Fireworks (1947), Puce Moment (1949-70), Rabbit's Moon (1950-70), Eaux D'Artifice (1953), Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome (1954-66)**

Fri. Oct. 14
7:00 **Films of Auguste and Louis Lumière** (1895-1900)
8:00 & 10:15 **Seven Women–Seven Sins** (1986)
10:30 Essential Cinema #2: **Films by Kenneth Anger: Scorpio Rising (1963), Kustom Kar Kommandos (1965), Invocation of My Demon Brother (1969), Lucifer Rising (1974)**

Sat. Oct. 15
6:00 & 8:30 **Films of Auguste and Louis Lumière** (1895-1900)
8:00 & 10:15 **Seven Women–Seven Sins** (1986)
10:30 Essential Cinema #3: **In the Street (1952) by Helen Levitt. Mass for the Dakota Sioux (1963-64), Quixote (1965) by Bruce Baillie**

Sun. Oct. 16
6:00 Essential Cinema #4: **Films by Jordan Belson: Allures (1961), Re-Entry (1964), Phenomena (1965), Samadhi (1967), Cosmos (1969). Films by Bruce Baillie: The Gymnasts (1961), A Hurrah for Soldiers (1962-63), Mr. Hayashi (1961), To Parsifal (1963), Yellow Horse (1965), Termination (1966), Tung (1966), Show Leader (1966), Roslyn Romance (1974)**
8:00 **Films of Auguste and Louis Lumière** (1895-1900)
10:15 **Seven Women–Seven Sins** (1986)

Mon. Oct. 17
6:00 Essential Cinema #5: **Films by Bruce Baillie: Castro Street (1966), All My Life (1966), Valentin de las Sierras (1968), Quick Billy (1971)**
8:00 & 10:15 **Seven Women–Seven Sins** (1986)

Tues. Oct. 18
6:30 Opening of **Alexander Kluge** retrospective. Limited seating. The film: **Abschied von Gestern (Yesterday Girl)** (1966)

For additional program and general information, call **(212) 505-5181.**

Partially sponsored by National Endowment for the Arts, Forbes Foundation, J.M. Kaplan Foundation, American Film Institute, and New York State Council on the Arts.

OCTOBER 46
Alexander Kluge
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Sun Oct 9 — 8pm
NEW FILMMAKER'S SHOWCASE
Films by Karl Soehnlein, Thalia Drori, Lynn Sachs, Susan Friedman and Phil Cummins.

Mon Oct 10 — 7pm
Jay Leyda's A BRONX MORNING &
Jules Dassin's NAKED CITY

Tues Oct 11 — 7pm
Fassbinder's GODS OF THE PLAGUE

Wed Oct 12 — 7pm
From Hungary: Karoly Makk's LOVE

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BLACK FRAMES

CELEBRATION OF BLACK CINEMA V

SCREENING SCHEDULE

APRIL 9TH – 16TH, 1988

SATURDAY 9th APRIL

ICA 7:00pm — **New England Premiere**
***OLDER WOMEN AND LOVE** (Camille Billops, 27 min., 1987, 16mm) Part documentary/part drama, this film candidly portrays a mix of multi-ethnic women discussing their love life, age, race, and how they cope with widowhood, divorce and separation in their social lives. UNITED STATES

TWO DOLLARS AND A DREAM (Stanley Nelson, 56 min., 1987, 16mm) America's first self-made millionairess, Madame C. J. Walker, and her daughter, A'Lelia Walker of Harlem Renaissance fame, are the remarkable subjects of this documentary. A fascinating interweaving of the social, economic and political history of an era. UNITED STATES

9:00pm — **New England Premiere**
***PLAYING AWAY** (Horace Ové, 90 min., 1986, 35mm) Set in rural England, Ové's latest feature humorously reveals the culture shock in evidence when an urban Black cricket team is invited by wealthy middle-class villagers to play a friendly match as part of their Third World Week activities. ENGLAND

SUNDAY 10th APRIL

ICA 3:00pm — ***BIG GEORGE IS DEAD** (Henry Martin, Kuumba, Ltd., 30 min., 1986, 35mm) Anger, betrayal and nostalgia come to the surface in this dramatic story revolving around the reunion of two old friends at the funeral of a third. ENGLAND

***HANDSWORTH SONGS** (John Akomfrah, 60 min., 1986, 16mm) The Black Audio Film Collective's debut film - an extraordinary montage of images and sounds that explores civil disorder in Handsworth and South London as presented through the media. Winner of the British Film Institute Grierson Award, 1987. (Presenter: Producer Lina Gopaul) ENGLAND

7:00pm — **JEMIMA AND JOHNNIE** (Lionel N'gakane, 25 min., 1962, 35mm) N'gakane, a South African living in English exile, depicts the adventures of two young boys set against the disturbing backdrop of simmering racial strife. Insightfully foreshadows the racial upheaval of the late sixties. ENGLAND

***TERRITORIES** (Isaac Julien, Sankofa Film & Video Ltd., 25 min., 1985, 16mm) The territory is the street, governed by race, class and sex, mediated by the glance. It is the site of a complex play of power relations. Images of decaying urban Britain collide with the inexhaustable assertiveness of Black street culture. ENGLAND

U.S. Premiere
***DREAMING RIVERS** (Martina Attille, Sankofa Film & Video Ltd., 30 min., 1988, 16mm) Miss T. has died "of England and a broken heart," and this "dream drama" brings us face to face with her recently departed spirit as her children and friends look on. A film of transformation and nostalgia for modern families touched by the experience of migration. (Presenter: Isaac Julien) ENGLAND

9:00pm — ***LOVE BREWED . . . IN THE AFRICAN POT** (Kwaw Ansah, 125 min., 1980, 35mm) A love affair between two young Africans torn by class differences leads to conflict and tragedy. An African film classic. Winner of the Oumarou Ganda Prize for Feature Films at 7th FESPACO (1981). GHANA

MONDAY 11th APRIL

BPL 5:30pm — **PANEL: THE DEVELOPMENT AND HISTORY OF BLACK INDEPENDENT CINEMA: ENGLAND, AFRICA, & THE UNITED STATES**
Moderator:
Mbye Cham, Howard University
Panelists:
Jim Pines, Freelance Writer, London
Manthia Diawara, African Film/Black Studies Dept. University of California, Santa Barbara
James Snead, English and Film Studies Dept. University of Pittsburgh

MCA 6:00pm — **DREAMING RIVERS**
(See Sunday's program for description)

***THE PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE** (Maureen Blackwood/Isaac Julien, Sankofa Film & Video Ltd., 80 min., 1986, 16mm) Set against the harsh backdrop of Britain in the 1980's, this film focuses on Black people working through their identities on their own terms ENGLAND

ICA 8:30pm — **KUKURANTUMI (ROAD TO ACCRA)** (King Ampaw, 86 min., 1983, 35mm) King Ampaw's first feature film offers a glimpse of the status of Ghanaian women in a story told with humor and pathos. A young woman, rebelling against an arranged marriage, is forced to leave home. Without skills or connections in the city, she becomes the unwitting victim of "progress." GHANA

TUESDAY 12th APRIL

BPL 5:30pm — **PANEL: AESTHETICS OF INDEPENDENT BLACK CINEMA**
Moderator:
Manthia Diawara, Black Studies, French/Italian Department, University of California, Santa Barbara
Panelists:
Teshome Gabriel, Black Studies Department University of California, Los Angeles
Clyde Taylor, English Department Tufts University
Kobena Mercer (until recently Lecturer, Centre for Carribean Studies, University of London, Goldsmiths' College). Currently British Film Institute
H. O. Nazareth, Filmmaker/Journalist, London

MCA 6:00pm — **BLACK GODDESS** (Ola Balogun, 90 min., 16mm, 1978) This feature film portrays the spiritual journey of an African reconnecting with his ancestry and re-establishing bridges within his own culture. An intoxicating evocation of myth and history. NIGERIA

ICA 8:30pm — ***PRESSURE** (Horace Ové, 120 min., 1974, 16mm) This ambitious film, the first narrative feature made by a Black filmmaker in Britain, depicts the growing disillusionment of a British-born Black youth as he discovers racism makes the conventional goals of British society unobtainable for him. A raw and urgent film which takes in the whole sweep of British "race relations." ENGLAND

WEDNESDAY 13th APRIL

MCA 6:00pm — ***SKIN AND COAL** (Claudine Booth, Social Film & Video, Ltd., 52 min., 1986, 16mm) This moving story of two generations of Black British mine workers depicts the struggle to gain acceptance inside and outside "the pit". ENGLAND

***WE ARE THE ELEPHANT** (Glenn Ujebe Masokoane, Ceddo Film-Video Workshop, 52 min., 16mm) Through a dramatization of Steve Biko's 1974 testimony at the Pretoria Supreme Court and evocative interviews with prominent activists, this film by the Ceddo Film-Video Workshop pays tribute to the Black youth of South Africa. (Presenter: Sandra Eccleston, Ceddo Film-Video Workshop) ENGLAND

8:30pm — ***BIG GEORGE IS DEAD**
(See Sunday's program for description)

***HOTEL LONDON** (Ahmed Jamal, Retake Film and Video Collective Limited, 52 min., 1987, 16mm) A gentle yet dramatic portrayal of a homeless young Bangledeshi family, forced to endure the discomfort and humiliation of bed-and-breakfast accommodations. ENGLAND

THURSDAY 14th APRIL

BPL 5:30pm — **PANEL: FILMMAKERS FORUM**
Moderator:
Claire Andrade-Watkins
Panelists:
Kwaw Ansah, Camille Billops, Claudine Booth, St. Clair Bourne, Sandra Eccleston, Lina Gopaul, Ahmed Jamal, Isaac Julien, Henry Martin

MCA 6:00pm — ***OLDER WOMEN AND LOVE**
(See Saturday's program for description)

TWO DOLLARS AND A DREAM
(See Saturday's program for description)

8:30pm — ***HANDSWORTH SONGS**
(See Sunday's program for description)

***WE ARE THE ELEPHANT**
(See Wednesday's program for description)

FRIDAY 15th APRIL

ICA 7:00pm — **BURNING AN ILLUSION** (Menelik Shabazz, Kuumba Ltd., 107 min., 35mm) A young British-born Black woman comes of age and begins to question her attitudes toward life. Realizing her status within a racist society, she strives to gain a greater awareness of herself, her identity and her position in contemporary Britain. ENGLAND

9:00pm — ***TERRITORIES**
(See Sunday's program for description)

***THE PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE**
(See Monday's program for description)

SATURDAY 16th APRIL

ICA 3:00pm — **KUKURANTUMI (ROAD TO ACCRA)**
(See Monday's program for description)

5:00pm — **JEMIMA AND JOHNNIE**
(See Sunday's program for description)

***PLAYING AWAY**
(See Saturday's program for description)

8:00pm — ***LOVE BREWED . . . IN THE AFRICAN POT**
(See Sunday's program for description)

MCA 7:00pm — *$10.00 Admission, this program only*
***LANGSTON HUGHES: DREAM KEEPER** (St. Clair Bourne, 60 min., 1986, 16mm) From the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Pride Movement, poet Langston Hughes artfully chronicled the history of Black America. Interviews and archival footage capture the historic struggles which stimulated Hughes' imagination and shaped the life and work of this pioneering artist. UNITED STATES

Closing Keynote Address
TONI CADE BAMBARA, noted award winning author whose works include GORILLA MY LOVE (Random House, 1983), THE SALT EATERS (Random House/Vintage, 1981) and IF BLESSING COMES (Random House/Vintage, 1987)

** Asterisk indicates filmmaker presentation at screening*

Fantasies of Opposionality

Imaging the Other

Representations of Vietnam in '60s Political Documentary

A QUEER KIND OF FILM
·
CONNOISSEURS OF HYPE
·
EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY
·
KAJA SILVERMAN
·
LATIN AMERICAN ARTISTS' BOOKS
·
THE ANTIQUE HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY
·
THE NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL
·
RICHARD PENA INTERVIEWED
·
SPE'S CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES
·
MICHAEL CORRIS
·
BUFFALO MEDIA MAKERS
·
SCANDINAVIAN PHOTOGRAPHY

"A Queer Kind of Film"

TODD HAYNES

This year, New York City's only forum for new work by lesbian and gay filmmakers was the week-long festival of experimental work, "A Queer Kind of Film," curated by Sarah Schulman and Jim Hubbard. For whatever reason, the higher-profile, feature-oriented New York Gay Lesbian Film Festival did not occur, placing all the more emphasis on its East Village counterpart. Schulman and Hubbard began the festival in 1987 out of a frustration with the limited conventions represented by the more "official" gay festivals. The question posed by this year's group of films—and that comprised the theme of a seminar included in the week—is to what extent a homosexual sensibility in film is articulated in a radical form. Immediately, the term "radical" requires definition, as does "homosexual sensibility." Are we simply radical or homosexual in relation to the dominant mainstream—as if the dominant mainstream was in turn some homogeneous whole from which we have departed? Perhaps the greatest value in the assembling of experimental work by gay filmmakers is in discovering the heterogeneity of such terms, and perhaps, one day, in exhausting them.

The group of films presented here may or may not accomplish this, although the selection was a large and fairly diverse one. The work ranged from the visual complexities and elegance of films by Barbara Hammer and Tom Chomont to the clinical punkiness of Lisa Guay's *Instructional Guide to Vaginal Fisting* (1987). But the films that stood out the most were those that fell outside the sanctioned definitions of experimental film, those that actively comment upon or critically engage elements from the dominant culture rather than creating idyllic alternatives, and that, by doing so, call into question the elasticity of such categories.

Communications from Weber (1988), by Robert Gates and Lynn Wyatt, is such a film. The subject of this jam-packed documentary is a radically eccentric transvestite named Albert-Michael (and/or Sabina) Weber. The film combines the black and white hand-held exploration of Weber's note-covered walls with saturated color clips from a '70s Russ Meyer film he appeared in. This is compounded by the continual run-on of his often brilliant ramblings, crammed onto the sound track or condensed into neat yellow intertitles that are flashed over screen images, often too quickly to read. The effect is dizzying, but it engages the viewer in a schizophrenia of mass consumption and excess that reflects that of its subject. Weber's existence is kinetic—glimpses of his rapid-fire expulsion of facts, thoughts and philosophies are barely discernible amid the continual drone of his radios and TVs. "Radio is on 24 hours a day," he says, "which is a random attempt to be free." Weber's theory of synchronicity asserts that "nothing is totally random because matter has a consciousness that is evolving." Like the influx of media and outpouring of notes, thoughts, and sketches, Weber says of his life: "I am caught in a 24-hour identity I can't transcend." Here, changing sexes is not a liberation; Weber appears to always be both Albert-Michael *and* Sabina. "Talk to me as both," he says with a grin. And yet he has already declared, "Half of me is always hidden in suffering." *Communications from Weber* describes the accidental moments of insight within a landscape of *over*-communication, in which its subject is caught in the binging/purging, male/female schizophrenia we call postmodern.

Frame enlargement from *The Place Between Our Bodies* (1975) by Michael Wallen.

The two films by San Francisco-based filmmaker Michael Wallen set up poles of self-imaging that vastly expand the boundaries of "the personal cinema." His first film, *The Place Between Our Bodies* (1975), seems to come from another planet, another epoch, in its frank and tender extrapolation of gay sexual hunger and the kindling of a first relationship. The film is stridently pre-AIDS—much more so than any mid-'70s porno. This is partly because it is a personal film that discusses sexual hunger and love in a context that endows them with transcendent powers. It begins with Wallen describing his early frustrations with gay life and what he calls the "endless hunt." When he unexpectedly finds a boyfriend and begins his first sexual relationship, the film slows down, and concludes with an extended sex scene between the two men. Sexual love overcomes the plight of gay alienation and sexual hunger. And that is what begins to turn the film around, so that its most beautiful moments become its most painful. Wallen's indescribable expression during orgasm, and the enveloping tenderness with which he (unsafely) fucks his boyfriend, left me chilled with a sadness barely discernible beneath the usual tough-skinned attempt—on my part, on everyone's—to endure.

This sadness, this desire to read things retrospectively, is exemplified in the somber tones of his most recent film, *Decodings* (1988). The film is made up entirely of archival footage from what seem like 1940s and '50s educational films, a half-arch, half-poignant voice-over, and a track of music from Prokofiev. The text attributes coming-of-age rituals and boyhood bonding to glimpses of boys' school activities, competitions, experiments with mercury, and stunts in fire and water. A secret life of primordial love is implied, in addition to a mythical union among a tribe of "wild boys," like William Burroughs's. Stories of sexual encounters, and finally an account of a man and dog in search of storms, haunt the cleverness of the film's style. It concludes on a note of suburban despair—the possibility of an original moment from a collective unconscious—in which a boy, lying on the backseat of his parents' car, discovers: "The trees are always there, they can be counted on. And nothing whatsoever can be counted on, nothing at all."

The new work by women presented this

(continued on page 20)

TODD HAYNES is a New York-based filmmaker and a cofounder of Apparatus Productions.

The Connoisseurship of Hype

EDWARD BALL

In 1975, Malcom McLaren was selling rubber skirts and dog collars for humans at his boutique, called Sex, on Kings Road in London. The experience was good training for his subsequent career as the P.T. Barnum of youth subculture, its leading marketeer and public relations officer. From the storefront of Sex, McLaren launched the Sex Pistols, a band that roused moral guardians to action and rode on a worldwide media spasm for three years. The Sex Pistols and their manager became the *primum mobile* of the punk movement, its emblem and headline, thanks to what McLaren describes as his "gift" for manipulating the press. In the 1980s McLaren went on to manage acts like Bow Wow Wow, whose 14-year-old singer posed nude for a record cover modeled after the Manet painting *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863). Such a reference to art history exemplifies McLaren's studied deployment of shock with an aesthete's delectation. Next the promoter cannibalized black hip-hop and rap, making his own music for the first time of citations from established styles: the 1984 *Fans* mixed a dance beat with opera, including *Carmen* and *Madame Butterfly*. Lately, McLaren has been developing *Fans* into a musical, slated to open on Broadway in 1989.

Even though our era is fully alert to the power of the "handler" and the public relations firm, the stage manager and the photo opportunity, few would think to suggest that McLaren's activities have had much to do with "art," though he did attend no fewer than four art academies as a young man. But then came Paul Taylor, curator of "Impresario: Malcom McLaren and the British New Wave," a recent exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City that invited the chameleonesque pitchman to walk through the door labeled Art and bask in its prestige. In the show (September 16-November 20), which was a mélange of T-shirts, press clips, pop videos, and other detritus of McLaren's various productions, Taylor collapsed the categories of the avant-garde and marketing, as though to present hype as a discipline for connoisseurship.

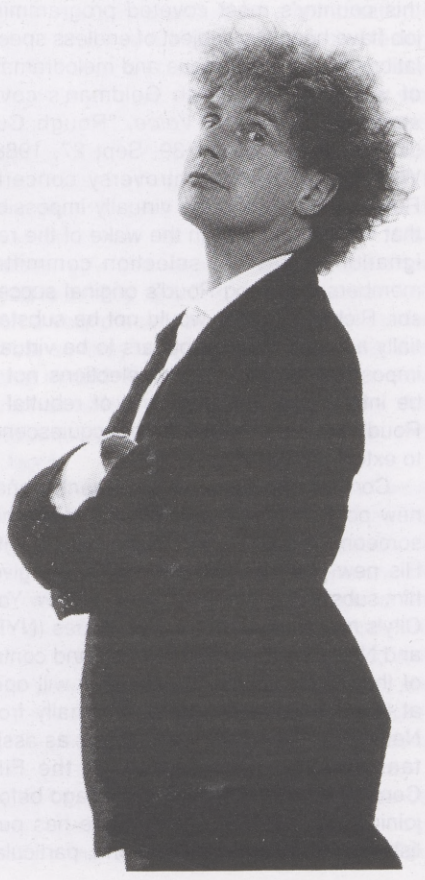
"Hype is the glue of the show, its main content, and the sum of its parts," admitted Taylor in conversation. "I wanted to do a show that would get a lot of publicity," he added, sounding like a good student of McLaren, who was once arrested for following the Queen's flotilla down the Thames River on a boat with the Sex Pistols as they sang their version of "God Save the Queen" (1977): "God save the Queen / The fascist regime / There is no future / And England's dreaming."

"Impresario" indeed drew big crowds, the largest ever for the New Museum, but also indifference and dismissals from the art world. At the opening, amid a crushing attendance of New York's bohemian sub-elite, for whom punk is one color in the palette of fashion personae, one museum-goer muttered, "I have a better collection at home in my closet." Apparently the art clan does not appreciate the category of "art" being publicly violated by comparisons with advertising and fashion, old concert posters and bondage trousers.

Unwittingly, perhaps, the New Museum had set itself up as the target for a McLarenesque provocation, which brought the dirt of non-art onto the stage of the art institution. The New Museum is known to have a preference for hermetic, anti-commercial work, and since the show tacitly celebrated McLaren's exploits as a profiteer, it was a difficult idea to sell. Ultimately, the result turned the museum into a vast reliquary of dead youth culture, filled with its formaldehyde slough of punk memorabilia and promotion videos.

"The stuff was not made for museums," said Taylor, referring possibly to the T-shirt with two naked cowboys wearing Stetson hats and facing each other, genitals to genitals. If the job of museums is to cordon art away from other areas of culture, namely commerce, the effort of "Impresario" to redefine McLaren the promoter into McLaren the artist was in part an institutional critique of the whole apparatus of art appreciation and the museum system (though one permitted by a museum). "There was an element of practical joke here that some critics, who gave the show a serious review, missed entirely," Taylor suggested. "It was a joke they didn't understand, because they were part of it."

Malcolm McLaren (1988) Photo by Kevin Cummins.



A self-selected audience of about 300 was given the opportunity to savor this meta-humor in a day-long symposium on September 24, unfortunately titled "God Save the Spectacle." Staged at the Fashion Institute of Technology, a trade school in the garment district, the event put forward McLaren himself as both subject and headline speaker.

McLaren speaks like a young Jack Benny touched with megalomania, and carries the heaviest world-weariness you will ever encounter. "The Sex Pistols were my effort to live life in a waking dream. The dream lasted about two years." He paused with each phrase. "When it was over, all that remained was to collect every press clip we could find." McLaren dressed in tweed for the event, looking like a professor of literature at a minor private college and not the Rasputin of Rock that is his usual pose. With quivering hands gripping the lectern in the late morning hour, he cultivated the myth that now surrounds him: "From the earliest days of my youth, I have tried to be bad. I was only happy when things were going wrong. I remember being unhappy if things went as they were supposed to."

Such self-romanticism perturbed a handful of Trotskyite agitators in the crowd who, apparently attracted by punk's utopian element and its image of permanent revolution, had hoped for a meeting of minds on the broader social struggle. "You're a pissing shallow expropriator, McLaren! We know where *you* stand in the class struggle!" shouted one, disappointed. "I should've stayed home and watched *Soul Train*!" At

(continued on page 20)

EDWARD BALL is an investigator in the critical division of K&B Art, a New York partnership.

A Book By Any Other Name

Libros: Recent Latin American Artists Books
at the Hostos Community College Satellite Gallery, Bronx, NY
Sept. 20-Oct. 25

HONOR LASSALLE

In one sense, one of the first things to consider about "Libros: Recent Latin American Artists Books" is the gallery in which it is shown: the Hostos Community College Satellite Gallery, a subsidiary of the Bronx Museum of the Arts, is located to the side of the main entrance to a small inner-city community college. The presence of the gallery, and its very gallery-ness, pose an interesting contrast to the chaotic lobby. Here one enters a conventional gallery space—white walls, spotlights, classical music playing on a tape, display cases, labels with the artists' names, countries, titles, and dates of the works.

The Bronx Museum borrowed these artists' books from the collection at Franklin Furnace Archive to create a show that ties in with the current exhibition at the museum, "The Latin American Spirit: Art and Artists in the United States, 1920-1970" (which runs from Oct. 1, 1988 to Jan. 29, 1989). In this context, and in the context of the satellite gallery, the curatorial motivation to bring together these works is well taken, but here lies also one of the problems with this show. The curatorial statement would like to link the notion of the artist's book, one that uses and expands on the conventional notion of the book form itself, to a Latin American history of collaboration between visual artists, poets, and writers, as well as a tradition of reproducible art forms such as posters and prints. However, very few of the works in this show seem tied to any such specifically Latin American tradition. The question then arises, as it often must when shows of this type are put together, of whether it is of interest to exhibit these artists' works together simply on the basis of their nationalities. (This question is often raised with reference to gender and shows of work by women artists.)

In this case, the answer would tend to be affirmative, because of the context of the show, and because of the Bronx Museum's motivation to be of value and interest to its neighborhood. However, in looking at the work itself the Latin Americanness of the artists takes a backseat, since the work, with one exception, is largely grounded in personal, theoretical, and aesthetic concerns, and not in specific cultural or political terms. The exception, Brazilian artist Josely Carvalho's *From the Memory Book of Underdevelopment* (1983), presents political concerns while also challenging the notion of the book in an interesting way. Made up of 10 pieces of silk that hang in space from the ceiling, *From the Memory Book of Underdevelopment* blends together silkscreened images and words, forcing the viewer to look at each piece on either side and to look through the images to get at the words. By combining personal and political photographic images and commentary (in English) and by designing and presenting the book in a manner that allows the viewer to move from image to image, Carvalho forces the viewer to actively construct messages or meanings from the work. At the same time, the title and the written text firmly declare that this work contrasts poverty and plenty and critiques the role of the spectator: "The markets were full of pineapples, bananas, incense, pigs ears, hunger, papayas, and barefeet. Amoebic dysentery thrived on future dreams while the tourists clicked their cameras to preserve poverty."

Detail from *Silabario Venezolano* (1983) by Carlos Zerpa.

Other, less specific works in the show also address the notion of the book as a form of presentation and address. These range from a conventional book of figurative poetry by German Perez to a collaborative work of boxed mimeographed sheets by the Mexican artists Felípe Feggo, Yani Pecanins, and Gabriel Macotela. A work by Puerto Rican artist Maritza Dávila, an accordionlike book called *Hogar para el paiseje* (*House of the Landscape,* 1987), uses the top edge of its pages to physically portray a mountainous landscape, while the work on the "pages" consists of small, abstract, color pieces. Another, particularly humorous work attributed to Ismael Vargas et al., entitled *Menu* (1983), incorporates writing with styrofoam plates that look like they have food fragments embedded in them. Mexican artist Anibal Delgado's *Letters for a Lady* (1986) turns the envelopes themselves into the surface for her work, using the address format and handwritten words, as well as a fingerprint for a stamp. The stripes of the airmail envelopes provide not only meaning but a formal field upon which to work.

There are more conventionally bound books for perusal available in the gallery (although they are attached to a table with nylon filament to prevent theft, which makes them difficult to look at). The experience of looking at these books contrasts with viewing those artists' books on display that address the book form itself in a different way. It also underscores the frustration of viewing this work under these orderly gallery conditions. The contents of the works shown seem diffuse and curiously without tension. The very action of putting artists' books into display cases, although perhaps necessary to protect them, denies them a physical relationship with the viewer in which variables of sequence and time might be put into play.

In this sense, one of the most effective works in the show is Argentinean artist Liliana Porter's *The Book in the Wall* (1988), which is inscribed onto the wall itself. The surface of the gallery wall becomes the book, with the use of collage, silkscreened images, and a three-dimensional paintbrush attached to the wall. Here the artist not only directly steps outside the conventional form of the book but also addresses the boundaries of the gallery as a forum for transgressing formal constraints.

Perhaps it is asking too much to expect that works that test the boundaries of the book form also test the boundaries of the gallery. The curatorial notes notwithstanding, the significance of the fact that these are Latin American artists lies not in any common thematic or stylistic thread, but in their differences, and because artists from Latin America actively contribute to contemporary North American artistic discourse. To recognize this makes a difference, and in this sense, this exhibition is a successful one.

HONOR LASSALLE is a photographer and writer living in New York City.

Haynes, cont'd.

(continued from page 3)

year couldn't rival the films by Chantal Ackerman, Su Friedrich, and Abigail Child, none of which are new, but all of which endure repeated viewing. Child's *Mayhem* (1987) has the forbidden lure of a sexy nightmare, as its web of fragmented sequences escalates in tension and innuendo. The film combines *noir*-like images implying danger and acts of sexual deviance and betrayal with fragments of archetypal footage and, finally, of early French pornography. Child's stylishness as an editor looms over many of her films as a potential screen to their depth or resonance. *Mayhem* escapes its own decorative virtuosity through its duplication of the repetitive, obsessive mechanisms that characterize memories surrounding forbidden desires. Memories that recombine early experiences and fantasies are also the subject of Friedrich's film *Gently Down The Stream* (1981). The film's text comes from pieces of childhood dreams that are scratched into the film word by word. This is accompanied by black and white images framed above the words, obliquely relating to themes of early sexual discovery. The skeleton of quivering words creates suspense as each "utterance" adds to each line of thought. It is as if the film rediscovers the strange power of language *to speak*. What is felt, ultimately (and is the film's most interesting quality), is the spell of muteness at the root of articulation. Finally, Ackerman's early masterpiece, *Je Tu Il Elle* (1974), explores rituals of depression and emptiness in a pace and style of elegant—and disturbing—sterility.

Autobiographical films ranged from the kaleidoscopic single-frame ejaculation of *Taylor Mead's Home Movies* (1988, by Taylor Mead) to Karl Soehnlein's three-minute flash, *My Room* (1987), which addresses issues of self-identity. Robert Hilfurty's *Partitions* (1988) has a fast, irreverent, and occasionally silly tone that ponders the question of honesty in relation to autobiography. The subject is implicitly filmic, as the story's narrator (who is *not* Hilfurty) recognizes the truth that seeps out when you lie. "This is the problem with autobiography" (and the beauty of film): "It's supposed to be about telling the truth, but already it is a lie." And Jack Walsh's intermittently stunning *Working Class Chronicle* (1985), a personal history is etched between the pervasive images of early '60s popular culture and the intense nonrepresentation of racial identities that exist outside a white, working-class upbringing.

In general, "A Queer Kind of Film" could get much tougher. The films could be more political, more discursive, angrier. And they could certainly begin to experiment more with hetero-culture. But the question remains. What did this group of films tell us about a homosexual sensibility in the context of radical form? It is interesting how the terms have changed when thinking of them in the 1970s as opposed to the 1980s. Experimental film and gay life flourished in the '70s, and each benefited from a purposeful withdrawal from dominant culture. I think that withdrawal is still a tendency deeply rooted in each, despite the conditions under which we are now living. If the '70s allowed us to find ourselves, the '80s require us to respond. And that's what experimental gay cinema must do now.

McLaren, cont'd.

(continued from page 3)

which point the blasé McLaren's eyes widened and he seemed to enjoy himself for the first time, offering this subliminal defense: "I'm very bourgeois. I've never denied that."

Later, McLaren demonstrated his famous talent for provocation by dropping a few surprising remarks, one of them possibly anti-Semitic, another possibly racist. "The Bible is nothing more than a Jewish businessman's guide," said Rasputin, himself a lapsed Jew. "Only deli owners read it." When asked why he had made a record with Bootsy Collins, a black bass player, he explained, "Because he reminded me of some witch doctor from the Congo."

Abetting this gentlemanly performance were former punk star Richard Hell (of Television and the Voidoids) and fashion designer Stephen Sprouse, who makes *haute couture* out of punk's do-it-yourself aesthetic, and who nodded in narcotic semi-consciousness throughout the proceeding. Hell admonished everyone that "this is a dead subject. It has reached academia, and it is easy to study because it is a corpse." He went on to tell stories about reading Verlaine and Rimbaud as a teenager before starting his first band. Sprouse was introduced by moderator Taylor as "one of the pioneers of the reification of punk style," though the designer overlooked or didn't understand this insult. He slurred a few sentences about "liking punk" and "having nothing to say" before showing one of his fashion videos and retreating into a stare.

Other panelists had written about the youth culture and underclasses that McLaren, a 42-year-old millionaire, is identified with. Rock critic Greil Marcus compared the punk period of the late 1970s to the general strike and events of May 1968 in France. Both, said Marcus, were "acts of speaking freely which allowed people to reconstruct history for themselves," a convincing position as far as it went, but somehow narrow when one remembers the slam dancing and safety pins hooked into skin. Jon Savage, a British cultural historian, told stories of other instances when promoters have exploited young delinquents, but generally said positive things about the outcome of McLaren's enterprise.

It must be said that no women spoke at the colloquium, nor was the question of gender directly addressed by the "Impresario: Malcom McLaren" show. Subculture and subversion seem to be of interest to men as a matter of debate, and teenaged boys as a form of delinquency. But subversion through style and media manipulation are not *per se* a masculine enterprise. One thinks of the Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous cell that, with strategic publicity and counter-exhibitions, has been heckling the New York art world in recent years into showing more women and minority artists. "An exhibition like this ["Impresario"] is a moratorium on issues," claimed Taylor, by which he means, I imagine, that as a departure from conventional curating, it defines its own discursive rules. Yet the male-dominated forum followed the "old" rules, as through frozen in time.

Punk emerged in the late 1970s as a communal music born of underclass despair. It was also, though one didn't know it at the time, the terminal gesture and death rattle of 1960s utopian politics. The moment of the Sex Pistols' demise coincided with the moment of appearance of the new zeitgeist of 1980s conservatism, the Pangloss-like worldview that encourages us to accept this best of all possible worlds with a kind of optimistic nostalgia. For all of his up-to-date entrepreneurship and flimflam, McLaren is in some stunted way still a child of the utopian era. "The 1980s have been a very confusing period for me," he admitted with uncharacteristic vulnerability to the crowd, a cigarette in hand. But the persona of the world-weary stylist quickly returned. "People used to do outrageous things because they meant something. These days it is for fame, and fame alone." He searched for the right epigram. "As someone who has had a taste of fame, I can say that it may not be worth it anymore, except to get you a good table in a restaurant."

IDENTITY CRISIS: THE LESBIAN AND GAY EXPERIMENTAL FILM FESTIVAL

Decodings **was one of two films by Michael Wallin presented at the second New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival.**

Courtesy filmmaker

Tom Kalin

In darkened auditoriums we learn the cool protected distance of the voyeur, while at home, in living rooms, we learn the intimacy of TV as furniture and friend. In the movies (and at home) we are shown a parallel world in which we are merely disembodied viewers, essentially invisible, spectators to a narrative in which we can effect no change, merely watching the inevitable progression to resolution whether we like it or not. Often we see no one remotely like ourselves, and we learn that some people never make it into the frame. A Queer Kind of Film: The Second Annual Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival provided an opportunity to interrupt our viewing habits and consider the politically necessary but troublesome question of a "homosexual identity"—gay or lesbian. For the so-called general population—that mythical group the mass media claims to address—the question of a gay presence, if asked at all, appears irrelevant. For the rest of us, the experience of reading the words "general population" coupled with recent legal actions—such as the 1986 Supreme Court decision that upheld state laws criminalizing sodomy—compels us to represent ourselves lest we disappear altogether.

Organized by writer Sara Schulman and filmmaker Jim Hubbard, the festival featured 62 films by 58 filmmakers, playing to packed houses for six nights at the Millennium Film Workshop in New York City's East Village. Structured roughly according to thematic and formal categories, the event's 12 programs—each one-and-a-half to three hours in length—constituted less a curatorial statement than an attempt to make a range of work visible. The 1988 festival was only the second edition of this unique event and the addition of a panel discussion provided a sorely needed public forum, tackling the thorny question, "Does radical content require radical form?" Barbara Hammer, who moderated the panel of filmmakers Abigail Child, Tom Chomont, Su Friedrich, and Hubbard, equated experimental filmmaking with an "experimental lifestyle" and assigned an innate radicality to both. In a similar vein, Schulman and Hubbard stated in their program notes, "The experimental process mirrors, in many ways, the process of understanding a gay identity." Any such discussion however, enters tricky terrain since neither experimental film nor identity are stable entities, but rather, unstable, susceptible to change, determined by the specific social and political conditions in which both are formed. Even to speak of a "gay identity" is for the most part a First World privilege, and such discussion can easily overshadow the equally important aspects of class, race, gender, and experience which comprise any

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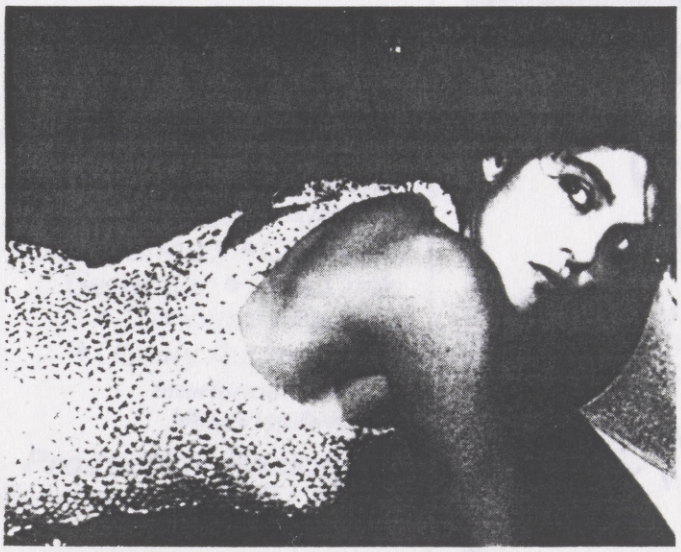

Abigail Childs refers to the sexual conventions of film noir, soap opera, and Mexican comic books in her film *Mayhem.*

Courtesy filmmaker

particular identity.

Recognizing this, the panel quickly acknowledged the contradictions inherent in the notions of experimental film and gay identity. Hubbard, whose own films are rooted in experimental documentary, vented hostility toward narrative and asserted that the mythology supporting narrative film—the nuclear family, the blissfulness of heterosexuality, the happy ending—deteriorates even while those films continue to be made. Su Friedrich, however, was less willing to dismiss narrative form. She began by challenging the heady word "radical," calling into question the alleged separation between form and content. Citing Stan Brakhage as an example, Friedrich debated the inherent radicality of using experimental filmmaking techniques, noting the tension beween Brakhages's conventional subject matter ("his family, his wife as muse, himself as genius artist") and his innovative, unconventional form. Conversely, she conceded that documentary and narrative films, though laden with a grim history of audience manipulation, had profoundly challenged her personal and social assumptions.

Friedrich's films address this ability to juggle the experimental with conventions of documentary or narrative, and her 1982 *Gently Down the Stream* remains strikingly fresh, one of the festival's most articulate examples of structural filmmaking. Making her words at once physical and silent, she scratches the contents of her dreams directly on the film, often accompanied by repetitive images of women swimming and exercising—each word flickering on screen for 18 frames. Forcing us to read one word at a time, the voice of a narrator is displaced with each viewer's reading of her parables of sexuality and ritual. Friedrich's work was included in a program of structural films that included Warren Sonbert's *The Cup and the Lip* and Roger Jacoby's *Aged in Wood*. Unfortunately, both films suffered in this context. Sonbert's cryptic, elegant and architectural film was flattened when played back to back with two other silent films. Jacoby's almost invisible film—which mainly shows the grain of the film stock and only faint images—pays lip ser-vice to Bette Davis and her longstanding role as a figure of identification for gay men by picturing an audience watching *All About Eve* and mouthing Davis' lines. Jacoby's other films, including *How to Be a Homosexual, Part 1*, although not included in the festival, are hand-processed quirky fables, often starring his lover and Warhol Factory superstar Ondine. A single isolated work by this filmmaker seemed stranded and small in this context.

During the panel discussion, Abigail Child asserted, "We look *at* content, we look *from* form," while pointing out that only in North America and Western Europe do we have the permission to indulge in lengthy debates on the nature of what is experimental. She focussed on lesbian and gay expressions as a permission to speak, an admission of difference within a culture of uniformity. One such admission, Childs' film *Mayhem* (recently censored in Tokyo for its use of Japanese lesbian erotica) recalls the sexual conventions prevalent in film noir. Even the costumes in the film are reduced to the shorthand of genitalia, women in dots, men in stripes. But *Mayhem* insinuates an inverted social order: Men lounge like coquettes in black panties; women alternately strangle them and return their stares. *Mayhem* reminds us that our bodies belong as much to the history of cinema as they do to our lovers, recalling Angela Carter's observation in *The Sadeian Woman*, "But our flesh arrives to us out of history, like everything else does. We may believe we fuck stripped of social artifice: in bed we even feel we touch the bedrock of human nature itself. But we are deceived."

Child's decision to work within the oppressive conventions of cinematic clichés in an effort to disrupt them was reiterated in a number of other films in the festival including Midi Onodera's *Ten Cents a Dance (Parallax)*, Curt McDowell's *Confessions*, and Juliet Bashore's *Kamikaze Hearts*. Cleverly isolating her individuals by using a split screen device, Onodera's three-part series of mating vignettes nevertheless perpetuate stereotypes of lesbians (all talk, no action), gay men (all sex,

no talk), and straights (lots of talk, simulated sex) without significantly questioning these categories. Touted as causing a "near riot" in San Francisco (presumably for the rather tame simulated tea room sex), Onodera's film relies on our knowledge of stereotypes for its humor but stops short of making a social critique or providing alternatives to typecast sexuality.

Similarly, *Kamikaze Hearts* uses the clichés of the porn industry to examine those who live within it. Attempting to "hurt the voyeur" by reducing our protected distance from the actresses and allowing her audience a strong identification with Tigr, who is both a character in the film and an actual person working as a porn producer/actress, Bashore refuses to ignore the complex and historic interconnections between sex work and lesbian culture. But Bashore also editorializes on the porn industry, using devices that emphasize isolation and artifice. We see Tigr and her lover Mitch trapped under ladders, pinned under cameras, as well as Tigr directing Mitch during a sex scene. Presenting a difficult blend of fiction, documentary, and morality play, the film ends with a cynical vision of alienated sexuality—wagging her needle at the camera after they shoot cocaine, Mitch taunts, "This is my dick. I fucked her with my dick, and she loved it."

Several other films in the festival attempted to directly confront questions of social identity, among them Michael Wallin's *Decodings* and *The Place between Our Bodies* and Robert Gates and Lynn Wyatt's *Communication from Weber*. All three share a recognition of the varied ways in which we make ourselves up out of bits of movies and magazines, unconsciously creating slivered and contradictory personae from a world of role models. Although made 13 years apart, both of Wallin's films deal with a persistent yet contradictory vision of the body, at once "free" sexually while controlled socially. *Decodings* presents an even paced collection of archival footage accompanied by a long, unadorned narration and music by Shostakovich. Wallin does more than quote the medical training films and stock dramas he has retrieved from the vaults, however. By conflating images from the world outside with personal, anecdotal experience he shows how deeply branded we are by the world of images and the signs of social coercion—a point made in scenes of open heart surgery, boys boxing blindfolded, mechanical arms with hooks instead of fingers fastening suit buttons, cars leaping through fire, and so on. On the soundtrack, a man's voice speaks about psychological collapse, boyhood homoerotic games of goosing, official sounding medical diagnoses, and oral sex in the desert with a Marine. *Decodings* delineates some of the overlaps of militarism and sexuality, medical examination and child's play, offering a reminder of how we can become alienated from our skin even as we live in it. As spectators we watch the distinction between our own lives and the fictions of film become blurred, indistinct. Wallin's earlier film,

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The Place between Our Bodies, begins by contemplating the standard definition of gay male identity circa 1975 as promiscuous, absorbed in the consuming world of pornography. As the film unfolds however, it yields to a celebration of the possibility of a relationship. Hardly polished—and often uncomfortable—the film pictures explicit sex but cannot be reduced to pornography.

During both the screenings of *The Place between Our Bodies* that I attended an AZT beeper happened to go off in the audience, a signal not only to a person with AIDS to take medication but also a sign of just how long ago 1975 seems. *A.I.D.S.C.R.E.A.M.*, by Jerry Tartaglia, and *No Photo Required*, by Larry Brose, expressed rage and a recognition of the feelings of victimization that result from AIDS. Unfortunately, both did this without admitting the possibility of effective activist resistence. A third film about AIDS in the festival—*Catching Fire*, a dramatic narrative film along the lines of a daytime soap—added nothing to the discussion of the issues at least raised by Tartaglia's and Brose's films. In contrast to these films, *The Place between Our Bodies* crudely yet effectively states a case for the importance of picturing gay and lesbian sex, countering the prevailing social climate that counsels abstinence, just saying "no." However, *Communication from Weber* most consistently addressed the question of identity. Gates and Wyatt's film employs a skewed documentary format to unfurl the banner of Albert Michael Weber/Sabina, a self-proclaimed "full-time third sex role transgender person." Weber explains that he initially took up cross-dressing as a masquerade to avoid masturbation, but he came to exploit his confusion of sexual identities as a retaliation against compulsory heterosexual sexism, "to show honestly both deep pain and exploitation of women." At one point, Weber asks his girlfriend to speak to him as both Albert and Sabina, effectively short-circuiting the myth of a coherent persona. At another moment, he shows his slip beneath jeans and flannel workshirt, confiding that his clothes reveal the entire story of his day. In *Communication* the body becomes the ultimate costume, socially framed and controlled, but still allowing its individual, melancholic voice to speak about alternate life.

The "queer kind of film" that Schulman and Hubbard have helped to cultivate admits such histories, such separate, idiosyncratic voices. Although the festival could have benefitted from programming that depended less on stylistic groupings and attempted to link works conceptually, the categorical structure most likely reflects the prevailing ideas about how to attract a sizable audience to such events. Still, the festival's apparent health in its second year and the fact that it will once again travel around the country are hopeful signs for the future. At the same time, a more thorough survey of gay and lesbian voices might include not just filmmakers but lesbian and gay work in video as well. It might also serve the interests of the festival's audience—or perhaps a wider audience—if the programmers didn't take

gay and lesbian sexuality as their sole criteria. We must gain even greater visibility so that others may see what we knew all along. Our speech has been too long withheld. As Sabina/Albert Michael declares in *Communication from Weber*, "I can see entire life. Cannot tell half to anyone."

Tom Kalin is a film- and videomaker living in New York City, whose latest tape is They are lost to vision altogether.

IN BRIEF

This month's festivals have been compiled by Kathryn Bowser, director of the **FIVF Festival Bureau.** Listings do not constitute an endorsement & since some details change faster than we do, we recommend that you contact the festival for further information before sending prints or tapes. If your experience differs from our account, please let us know so we can improve our reliability.

DOMESTIC

ANN ARBOR FILM FESTIVAL, Mar. 21-26, MI. 27th annual exhibition for "all films that demonstrate a high regard for film as a creative medium." Oldest 16mm fest in the country, w/ long tradition of showcasing independent & experimental films. Over 100 films shown each yr in programs that incorporate variety of styles: doc, animation, experimental, shorts, small features. No special cats, guidelines, or requirements for entries. Awards incl. Tom Berman Award to most promising filmmaker ($1000) & Marvin Felheim Award ($100); about $4000 in addt'l awards given at judges' discretion. Selected participating films chosen by awards jury go on nat'l tour to colleges & film showcases after fest; rental fee of $1/min. paid. Entry fee: $25. Format: 16mm. Deadline: Mar. 3. Film arrival deadline: Mar. 16. Ann Arbor Film Festival, Box 8232, Ann Arbor, MI 48107; (313) 995-5356.

ASIAN AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL, June, NY. Producers, directors, writer/producers & writer/directors of Asian heritage eligible to participate in noncompetitive 5-day showcase, now in 12th edition & country's oldest fest of films by established & emerging Asian/Asian American filmmakers. Last yr's program marked by record attendance & extensive press coverage. Features & shorts accepted: experimental, doc, narrative, performance pieces, adaptations. Program goes on int'l tour after opening. No entry fee. Format: 35mm, 16mm; preview on cassette or rough cut. Deadline: Mar. 31. Contact: Marlina Gonzalez, Asian Cine-Vision, 32 E. Broadway, New York, NY 10002; (212) 925-8685.

ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL, May, CA. Accepts films dealing w/ (but not limited to) Asian Pacific & Asian Pacific American culture, history & experiences. Cosponsored by Visual Communications & UCLA Film & TV Archive. Feature, dramatic/narrative, doc, experimental & animated works incl. 4th annual program incl. regional showcase of recent work of Asian Pacific filmmakers in Southern CA as well as int'l selection of films from countries of Pacific Rim. No entry fee. Formats: 35mm, 16mm, super 8; preview on cassette. Deadline: Jan. 31. Contact: Abraham Ferrer, Asian Pacific American International Film Festival, Visual Communications, 263 S. Los Angeles St., Suite 307, Los Angeles, CA 90012; (213) 680-4462.

ATHENS INTERNATIONAL FILM & VIDEO FESTIVAL, Apr. 28-May 6, OH. Now in 16th yr, fest committed to presentation of work of int'l ind. film artists. This yr Athens Video Festival merges w/ film fest. Prizes total $6000. Cats: experimental, doc, traditional narrative, experimental narrative, animation. All work must be completed btwn Mar. 1987 & Mar. 1989. Entry fee: $20-30, depending on length. Format: 35mm, 16mm, super 8, 3/4", 1/2". Deadline: Feb. 10 (video), Mar. 17 (film). Contact: Craig Stevens/Ruth Bradley, Athens International Film & Video Festival, Box 388, Athens, OH 45701; (614) 593-1330.

ATLANTA FILM & VIDEO FESTIVAL, May 10-14, GA. Juried competitive fest for new, ind. animated, narrative, doc, experimental & student works of all lengths, now in 13th yr. $5000 in cash & equip. prizes. Judges this yr: Neil Seiling of Intermedia Arts & video artist Lisa Steele (video); Scott MacDonald of Utica College & ind. documentarian Jan Krawitz (film). Work must be produced in last 2 yrs. Entry fee: $25. Format: 16mm, super 8. Deadline: Feb. 10. Contact: Shellie Fleming, Atlanta Film & Video Festival, IMAGE Film/Video Center, 75 Bennett St., NW, Suite M-1, Atlanta, GA 30309; (404) 352-4225.

BIRMINGHAM INTERNATIONAL EDUCATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL, Apr. 3-21, AL. 17th annual edition of competitive fest for "creative films for lifetime learning." 14 cats incl. Americana, arts, business/industry, early childhood, energy/environment, health/physical ed, human relations, independent/student, language arts, math/science, religion/philosophy, special challenges, social sciences, teacher/career education. Awards: Best of Fest (Electra statuette & $1000); Silver Electra & $500 to best film & best video; Best of Category for best film & video in each cat. Finalists receive certificate of recognition. Work must be completed btwn Jan. 1, 1987 & Jan. 1, 1989 & be under 60 min. Synopsis must accompany each entry. Entry fees: commercial/noncommercial $25-40 before Jan. 20, $30-50 after; student $15 before Jan. 20, $20 after. Format: 16mm, 1/2". Deadline: Jan. 31. Contact: BIEFF, c/o Alabama Power, Box 2641, Birmingham, AL 35291-0665; (205) 250-2550 or BIEFF, c/o Jean Wilson, 508 Central Ave., Bessemer, AL 35020; (205) 426-0656.

DANIEL WADSWORTH MEMORIAL VIDEO FESTIVAL, February, CT. Open competition for ind. experimental/art video, subjective/hybrid docs & cross-genre works. Opening reception Feb. 17; exhibition continues through Mar. 17. Work must be completed after Jan. 1, 1987 & under 30 min. No formal cats; competition awards 6 prizes: $500 grand prize, $400 2nd prize, 4 $200 fest prizes (prizes incl. purchase price of tapes to be added to collection of Real Art Ways). 135 works entered last yr. No entry fee, but entrants pay return postage. Format: 3/4", 1/2". Deadline: Jan. 31. Contact: Real Art Ways, 94 Allyn St., Hartford, CT 06103; (203) 525-5521.

HERLAND FILM & VIDEO FESTIVAL, April, NY. Sensitivity to women's issues & creativity inform selections for 3rd edition of fest for works for & about women. All genres accepted. Entry fee: $5. Format: 3/4", 1/2", Beta, 16mm, 8mm. Deadline: April 4. Contact: Oswego Art Guild, Box 315, Ft. Ontario Pk., Oswego, NY 13126; (315) 342-3579.

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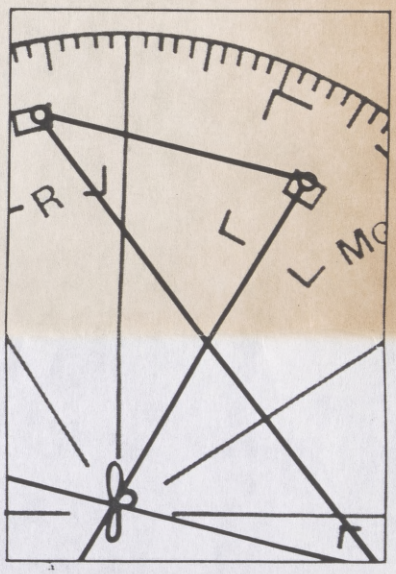

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Vittorio Scarpati
"Aquarium, N.Y.," 19

by David Hirsh

Vittorio Scarpati
56 Bleecker Gallery
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April 22—May 27

Michael Wallin
Whitney Museum Biennial Exhibition
975 Madison Avenue
May 18—May 24

Vittorio Scarpati's large selection of drawings offers a running commentary on his current hospital stay with AIDS. Otherwise diverse, these works can allude to Renaissance woodcuts, Classicism and Formalism, Surrealism and expressive Pop.

With angels, animals and the artist himself as prime subjects, this isn't a peaceable kingdom, though it is often a comical universe. Hypodermics, bodily explosions and questions about suicide mix freely with narrations of transcendence. Saying goodby is counterfaced with lively music.

A comparison with Otto Dix's war drawings is not direct, but the impression of both is similar—of a fierce will to survive in times of devastation.

Scarpati was born in Naples, Italy in 1955. Gaining recognition for work often bearing leftist statements, he came to this country after marrying *Details* columnist Cookie Mueller. Glenn O'Brien writes, "he has been an inspirational figure in the art community since he emigrated from Italy six years ago. . .renowned as a commentator on the hype and sleight of hand machinations of the art world." Many international celebrities packed into this first solo opening for the artist.

"I've been in the hospital since the 11th of January; all the work in the show is from these three months. I am very fast. It entertains me in this very boring situation. It is my way of translating all of this, a way of taking it away from me and sticking it somewhere else. Another way is making fun of it, which helps exorcise a little more of the pain.

"These drawings come out by themselves. I am simply a medium for my generation, for my situation. I represent the state of mind I'm in. In this drawing [being done while he talks], there's a collection of objects coming out of my head, which is exploding.

"I started drawing as a kid. When I was 15 my father asked what kind of school I wanted to be in, and I said I wanted to go to art school or sailing school. My family has been sailing for 12 generations. He refused to make me into a sailor; he had been one for a long time and he hated it. He suffered from seasickness. So that gave me the chance to go to art school in 1968.

"I was no good in school. The teachers didn't know the problems. Besides that, we welded the gates of the school shut and occupied the Academy of Art. In the meantime, I never interrupted my drawing. I was always working, for my friends. I gave it all away and never had anything to show. It's been that way forever, until now. I needed to [illegible] into a hospital to put my shit together. [illegible] used to do graffiti. At that time I had no [illegible]ousness at all of what I was doing. [illegible]ars had to pass before a word came [illegible]apolitan newspaper, on the front [illegible] the graffiti I had done. It [illegible]at I used to write in the same [illegible]quiat, who at that time I [illegible] reminds me that I did [illegible]rble, which is porous, [illegible] and it becomes a [illegible]wings represent [illegible]mine and his [illegible]th the dol- [illegible] with her. [illegible]d hurt [illegible] said [illegible]ed [illegible]or a go[illegible] at the Aqua[illegible]d she was talking[illegible]es and other things. I [illegible]derstand why she was preten[illegible], falling on the floor. Another guy [illegible]e around and looked at me, went around the pool again, and then turned his ass to my face and he shit. At that point, I was perplexed.

"This isn't easy. There were periods when I was very, very much in pain and I didn't have the chance to put a pen to paper, you know? They give me humongous amounts of drugs. But the urge is very strong and you really want to get it out.

●

San Francisco filmmaker Michael Wallin has shown his work in most of the New York theaters for independent cinema, including the Museum of Modern Art. His new film, *Decodings*, will show at the Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, on the second floor, on May 18-24, Wednesday through Saturday at 3:00 and Sunday and Tuesday at 4:00. It runs for 20 minutes.

Decodings is an effective, poetic and intelligent meditation on aggressive cultural channelings into manhood and the loneliness it bears. Near the beginning, the film's narrator speaks of men who "know each other by touch," who "have always loved, bringing hope to the land." The script progresses to breakdown and isolation, though the effect is thoughtful rather than deflating.

The collage of found footage often dwells on man's maneuvers around nature. Clear psychological shadings are highlighted. The film impacts in its search for openings: "We make what bridges we can."

Wallin was born in Palo Alto, CA. in 1948. After undergraduate school at Yale and Berkeley, he received his M.A. in Film from San Francisco State University in 1976. He has taught at an art school in the Bay Area and currently works as a film negative cutter. *Decodings* premiered at the Gay and Lesbian Experimental Film Festival in September 1988 and has since received awards and acclaim in the U.S. and Europe.

GALLERIES

Following are joined excerpts from a recent conversation with the artist in his New York host's Tribeca apartment.

"This film is a major departure from previous work, in that I have not shot any of the images myself. It's all borrowed footage, mostly from documentaries, newsreels, education and science films from the late '40s through the early '60s.

"I had been collecting footage over several years and I felt I had explored camera and editing strategies I was interested in. I had previously dealt with a lot of landscapes; some reviewer described my work as "mapping out a topographical cinema.' I'm more on the lyrical side, although I cross boundaries. I'm interested in strong lines and grids.

"I also wanted to do something very personal. Prior to this my most personal film was *Between Our Bodies*, and that was 12 years ago. That film was almost embarrassingly confessional—very direct, about my sexuality. This new film is personal in a different way. The sexuality is more veiled. It forces the viewers to use their own minds.

"I was fascinated with found footage or collage films, particularly those of Bruce Connor and the collaborations of Joseph Cornell. The majority of my footage came to me from a company in New Jersey that distributes films they buy *en masse* from school districts or institutions.

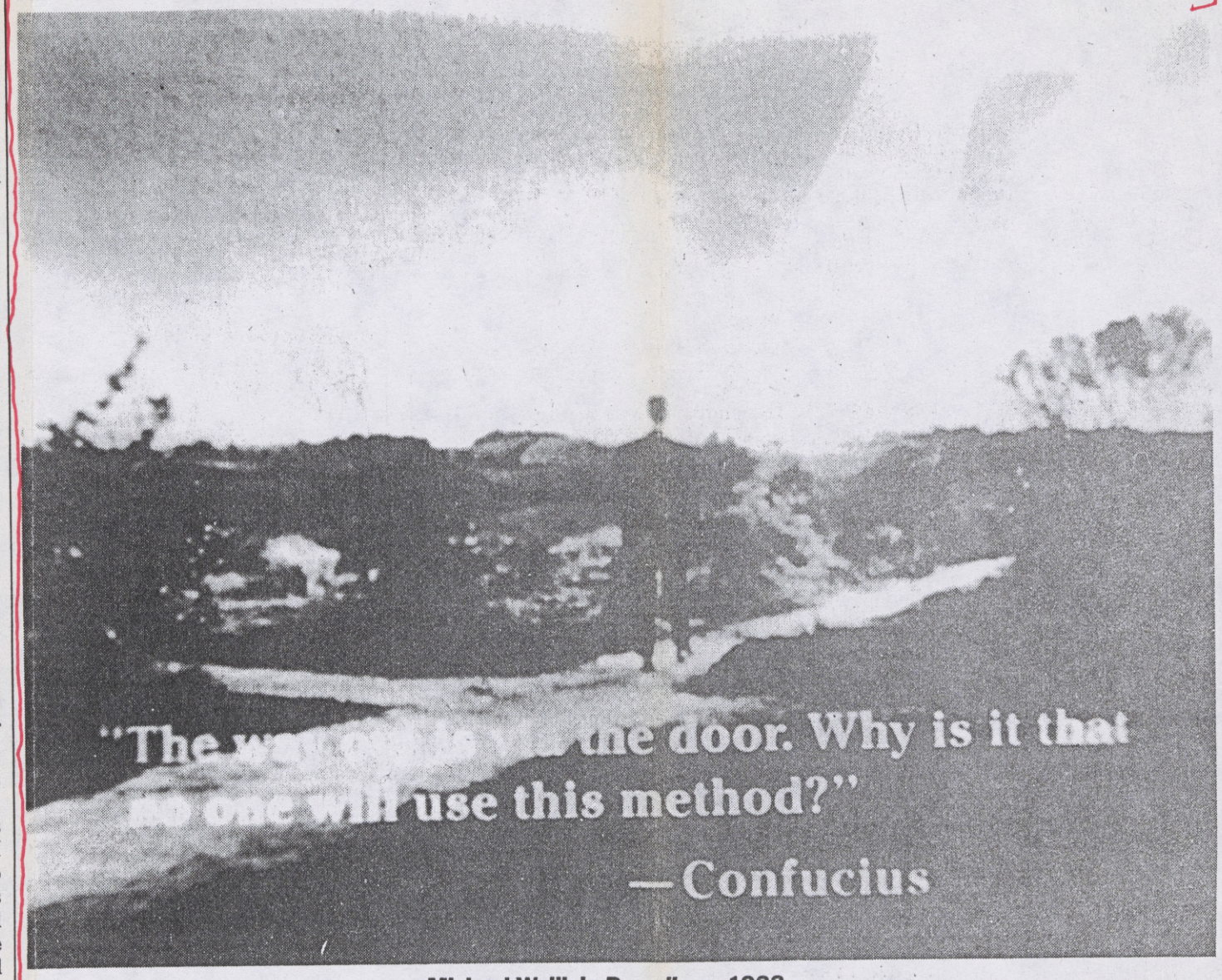
"I was drawn to certain images from a formal point of view, but I also discovered that I happened to be choosing a lot of images of boys and young men. It was almost happening in an unconscious fashion. I realized at that point what the film was going to be about—it was going to be about *me*, filtered through a bank of imagery.

"I decided that I'd make the film about the process of growing up male—and gay—in this culture. It deals with issues of intimacy, communication and barriers to expressions.

This film is also a departure in that it's the first time I've ever really collaborated with another person. I turned the work over to a writer, Michael Blumlein, who is also a doctor and a life-long friend, who knows me very well. I told him ideas to incorporate. I revised some and added a little of my own writing. It's read by poet Bill Graves.

"I grew up in the Bay Area and I feel at home there. My family took a couple vacations in Europe and I was assigned the role of documenting them, which I enjoyed tremendously. In the summer of '68 I was apprentice to Bruce Bailey, which had a profound impact on me.

"I'm amazed at what's happened with *Decodings*. I hope that this film gives life to some of my earlier work. I have about 13 films that I consider to be the body of my work. Now I'm anxious to shoot my own images again. I want to do a film that deals with aspects of my psychology and sexuality, my obsessions." ■



Michael Wallin's *Decodings*, 1988

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HOW DO WE LOOK?

THE BAY AREA AS SEEN BY THE NATIONAL MEDIA

Are we the kook capital of the United States, or the nation's high tech mecca? Have we lost the competitive edge or do others look to us as a model? The answer is all of the above, according to the Bay Area's national news correspondents.

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INSIDE

BREAKING THE CODE

Local Filmmaker Michael Wallin's **Decodings** *plays the S.F. Film Festival*

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LOCAL BOYS MAKE GOOD

Two bands hit the road to national success

by Ann Powers

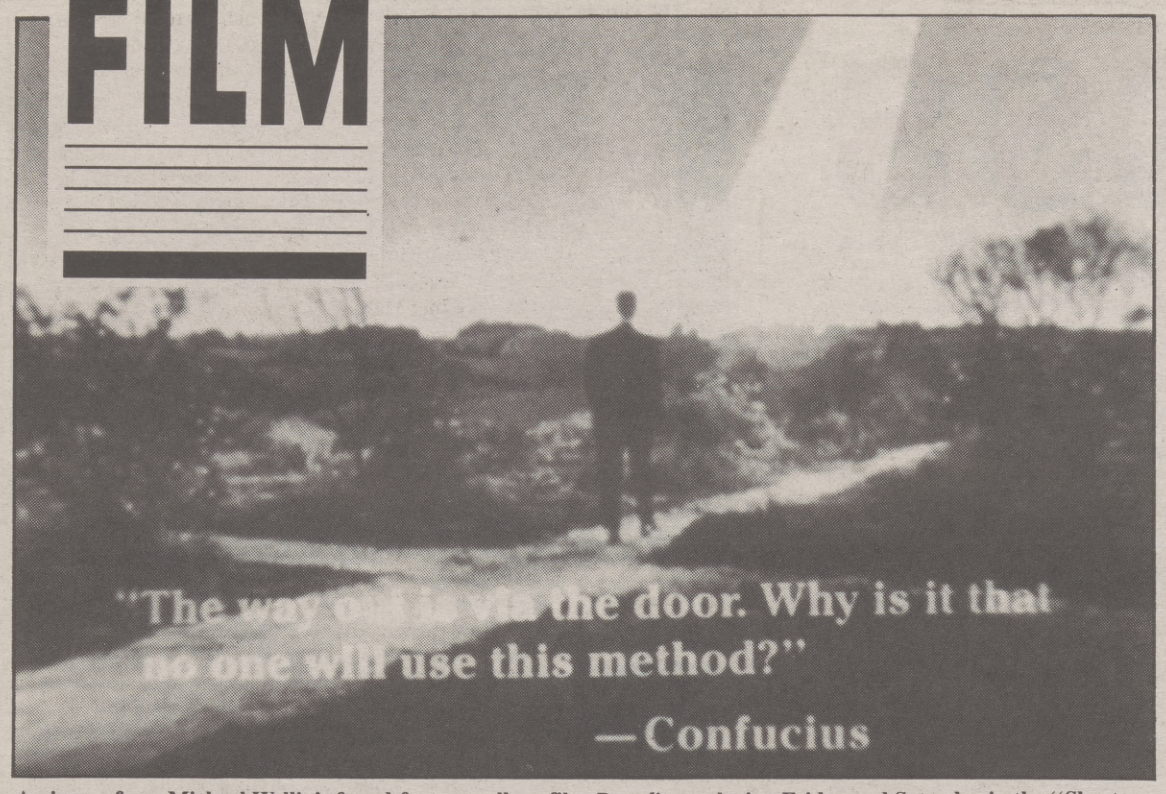
As with any historical event, we perceive the emergence of Elvis or Johnny Rotten as a discrete phenomenon, linkable, perhaps, by events preceding and following it, but really standing rather freakishly on its own. ELVIS! THE BEATLES! THE SEX PISTOLS! We learn these names in capitals, with exclamation points, as if time really did stop for a full breath when these artists first took the stage. This is how we like our rock and roll—as singular and startling as a drumbeat. The drummer's arm goes down, the skin is hit, and boom.

That's one aspect of pop perception: no continuity, just excitement and change. Then there's the more sophisticated (some say jaded) idea that the big changes are merely peaks in the production cycle. It's frightening to hear the cycle's devotees talk about the generation of the Next Big Thing, but after a while, it's hard not to sense that what they're saying is at least partially true. They've got the numbers to prove it.

Guns 'N' Roses were marketed successfully through MTV and promotional doormats. The fan (or the consumer, as you're now called) doesn't make his or her own decision. A little cathode tube in your mind whispers George Michael's name.

Continued on page 9

FILM



An image from Michael Wallin's found-footage collage film *Decodings*, playing Friday and Saturday in the "Shorts II" program of the S.F. International Film Festival.

CODE BREAKER

Local filmmaker Michael Wallin's *Decodings* plays S.F. Festival

by Patrick Hoctel

Michael Wallin's *Decodings* says more about intimacy and relationships between men in its scant 15 minutes than a dinosaur like *Torch Song Trilogy* does in 135. The 40-year-old San Francisco director, who has been a filmmaker for 20 years, is happily receiving all kinds of acclaim for this haunting, lyrical and often slyly humorous micro-feature, which shows in the "Shorts II" program of the San Francisco International Film Festival this Friday (7:30 pm) and Saturday (1:15 pm) at the Kabuki.

Besides winning the Grand Prize at the prestigious Thomas Edison Black Maria Festival, *Decodings* has also been chosen for inclusion in the upcoming Whitney Biennial. In April Wallin will hit Chicago, Boston, New York and L.A. on a tour that will eventually wind up at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley in June.

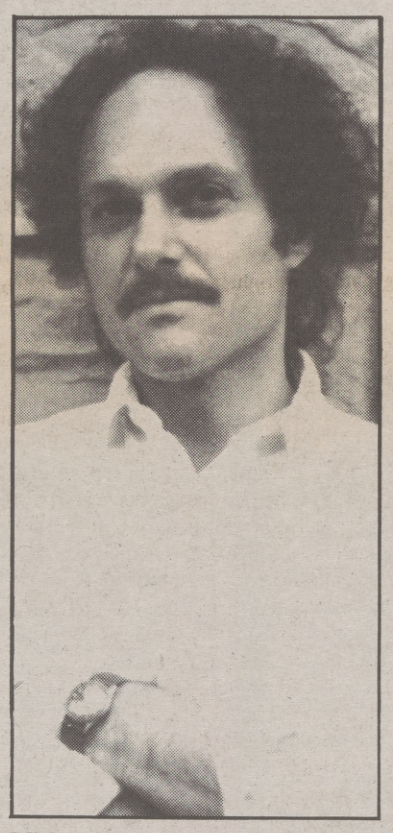
The filmmaker's latest work is a marked departure for him on two major levels. Prior to *Decodings*, the director shot all his footage himself. But this time, in a conscious attempt to do something completely different, he turned to found footage as his inspiration, and old documentaries, newsreels, and scientific and educational films from the '40s to the '60s became his material.

Decodings reflects Wallin's desire to switch from what he terms "camera tactics—ways of filming and manipulating images" to using found footage to produce an effect that is "more open-ended and mysterious."

Although Wallin has had other people work on his films, he never had anyone he could truly call a collaborator until writer, doctor and lifelong friend Michael Blumlein agreed to write the text for *Decodings*. (Wallin, with a Cheshire cat grin, estimates Blumlein's contribution as "about a third of the film.")

Unlike many "collage films," *Decodings* is tight, both thematically and organizationally, with not a second wasted. And in contrast to many films of this genre, where the footage appears thrown together for reasons not readily apparent or for the sake of kitsch, Wallin and Blumlein have taken these images and made of them a poignant whole all their own. As Wallin concluded after editing the film, "They're images I probably would've shot myself."

The director's decision to construct his film from found footage was also based on his belief that "human behavior, rituals and customs, and learning processes are *encoded* in its media records, film among them." Wallin elaborated further on this theory at the West Coast premiere of his film last October: "Isolating images from



Michael Wallin

their original context—then recombining them in new relationships—intrigued me as a way of stripping the images of their rigidly processed meanings, of *decoding* them."

Watching *Decodings* is a lot like studying hieroglyphics, where forms, and how they're placed in opposition to each other, create meanings not easily decipherable on a first glance. What the director has gleaned from the film bits he's selected—the messages that lie below the surface like pentimento—emerges as a wave of recognition, at once both strange yet achingly familiar, that slowly washes over the audience.

We see men in uniform marching solemnly in unison, little boys boxing, older boys playing games on a playground and rushing *en masse* into the ocean. The narrator calmly recites a story about a tribe of lost men in the desert who grow continually younger, and caps it by telling us how he knelt and did reverence in front of a Marine Adonis ("I placed my mouth over his already hard cock"). We're swept up in the painful realization of what we have always known but have buried or accepted without protest: the destructive prohibitions against men touching or being intimate in our culture, without some sort of excuse, usually violence, to make it okay.

Even though Wallin has described *Decodings* as a "psychosexual portrait told in the third person" and admits that his choice of footage was "guided by personal, almost autobiographical concerns," his own problems with "scary issues" like intimacy and fear of abandonment have been broadened by these universal, mythic images and the narrator's fables into a parable that speaks to us all.

The film's most disturbing sequence, a war veteran dressing himself with hands that are now hooks, is repeated several times and serves as both warning and reminder as to where our society's strictures against men openly expressing affection can lead. The heart that's literally laid bare near film's end appears to be the director's, opening itself up for our examination, exposing its own vulnerability that's so startlingly a mirror of our own.

Decodings is a magical, seamless work that manages to beguile even as it probes areas tender to the touch. Its tale is beautifully told, but as the narrator cautions at the beginning, "It is not a story for the timid."

Michael Wallin's *Decodings* screens in the Shorts II program of the S.F. International Film Festival, Fri at 7:30 pm and Sat at 1:15 pm at the Kabuki Theatres. SF

CLOSING HIGHLIGHTS

S.F. Film Fest's Final Week

The *Weekly*'s film critics recommend the following events in the last five days of the S.F. International Film Festival. As always, we encourage you to take chances.

Unless otherwise noted, all screenings are at the Kabuki Theatres in S.F.

Joseph L. Mankiewicz

Tabataba (dir. Raymond Rajaonarivelo, Madagascar 1988). Wed 7:15 pm; Thur 6 pm at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley; Sat 7:30 pm. Delicate testament to the little-known 1947 Malagasy Insurrection, in which over 100,000 died.

Lightning Over Braddock (Tony Buba, U.S. 1988). Wed 9 pm; Thur 5:30 pm. The documentary muse of Braddock, Pa. turns to fiction film with a "Rust Bowl fantasy."

Komitas (Don Askarian, West Germany 1988). Thur 6 pm (special benefit for Armenia quake relief); Fri 4:30 pm at the PFA; Sun 1:15 pm. Our Laura Miller calls this "a flawlessly beautiful elegy to lost Armenian heritage."

Evening Bell (Wu Ziniu, China 1987). Thur 6:30 pm, Fri 4:30 pm, Sat 7:30 pm at the PFA. Tense, wrenching WWII story; recently released from Chinese government ban.

An Evening With Joseph L. Mankiewicz, featuring *People Will Talk* (1951). Thur 8 pm. Mankiewicz accepts the Festival's Kurosawa Award, and you'll see one of his finer dramas, starring Cary Grant.

The Cannibals (Manoel de Oliveira, Portugal 1988). Fri 2 pm. Postmodern opera in neo-18th century style. Flesh-eating, robotics, necromancy, love. Great stuff.

War Requiem (Derek Jarman, England 1989). Fri 8 pm; Sat 2 pm. Jarman's latest imagefest uses text by WWI poet Wilfred Owen and music by Benjamin Britten. Reputedly a wowser.

King of Children (Chen Kaige, China 1987). Fri 9 pm; Sat 3:30 pm. New feature from the leading figure of China's new wave sets a rural schoolteacher against Mao's Cultural Revolution.

Let's Get Lost (Bruce Weber, U.S. 1988). Fri 9:45 pm; Sat 5 pm. Fashion photogger Weber overstylizes the myth and reality of jazzman Chet Baker. Beautiful and sometimes moving; maybe fundamentally voyeuristic and sleazy.

Die Nibelungen (Fritz Lang, Germany 1924). Sat 4:30 pm (Part I, *Siegfried's Death*) & 8 pm (Part II, *Kriemhild's Revenge*) at the Castro. Stupendous silent adaptation from Nordic myth in newly-restored print, accompanied live on the Castro's mighty Wurlitzer.

Jackie Chan Tribute, Sun 3 pm. Hasn't the acrobatic Hong Kong superstar gotten enough media adulation? Not yet. Features a selection of high-energy clips and the great man in person.

The S.F. International Film Festival ends Sunday. Tickets are available at the Kabuki, at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, and through BASS. For information call 931-FILM. SF

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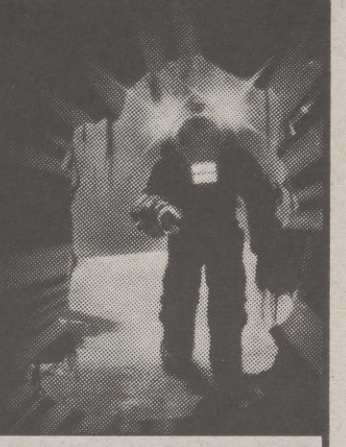

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MANOHLA DARGIS

CounterCurrents

The Cost of Inflation

NEW YORK

It's a mistake (as a recent *New York Times* article did) to regard the Whitney Biennial as *the* barometer for noncommercial film and video. Of course, the Biennial demands attention, and this year's program included inspired work—some of which has been reviewed in this paper—but overall, the show was flat-footed.

It was difficult to muster much excitement, in part because the last two years have been markedly fecund and there simply wasn't enough work included this year (film, in particular) to do justice to the current climate. The limited selection (31 in all for '89, excluding an installation and two mixed-media performance pieces) again made it impossible to consider the curatorship as anything but highly arbitrary, albeit institutionally sanctioned. Like a *Sports Illustrated* highlights compilation video, the Biennial signifies what is supposed to be important and what you should have seen. As in the past, the films and videos will be circulated internationally by the American Federation of Arts, presumably providing a wider audience than the work would normally receive. (Two of this year's films and one video will be broadcast as part of Channel 13's *Independent Focus*, which also features selections from past Biennials.)

With the notable exceptions of Leslie Thornton, Jason Simon, Martha Rosler, and Rea Tajiri, I found many of the 19 videos painfully dull, too often dissolving into monotonous techno-aerobics or intellectual vacuity. While the film selections included some of the most engaging work of the last two years—by Su Friedrich, Michael Wallin, Abigail Child—too much was not represented. Once again there was no Super 8, an absurd omission considering the vital production in this smallest, commercially unviable film gauge. It would be easier to take seriously the Biennial's repeated claim that it features work outside the marketplace if Super-8 films by Peggy Ahwesh and Lewis Klahr had been programmed (as well as Mark Lapore and Saul Levine's hilarious *Submission*, in which Levine rants about curator John Hanhardt's infamous statement that if there was strong Super-8 work, he'd show it). Todd Haynes and Cynthia Schneider's *Superstar*, anything by Phil Solomon, Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line*, Stan Brakhage's *Dante Quartet*, and any of George Kuchar's videos (why on earth has he never been in the Biennial?) could all have hopped up an otherwise anemic program.

One film I was grateful to see again is Larry Gottheim's *The Red Thread*. Gottheim, who has been represented in two previous Biennials, makes rich and elusive films that demand repeated viewings. In this, the artist's ambivalence about masculine subjectivity, expressed in voiceover, is balanced with images that are traditionally female-identified: crowds of little children, a woman weaving, as well as the symbolically fertile red thread. As in his recent film on Haitian refugees, *Machette Gillette . . . Mama*, Gottheim's editing—a weave of rapid, incremental jump cuts—clearly undermines easy consumption. Implicit in this strategy is the recognition that

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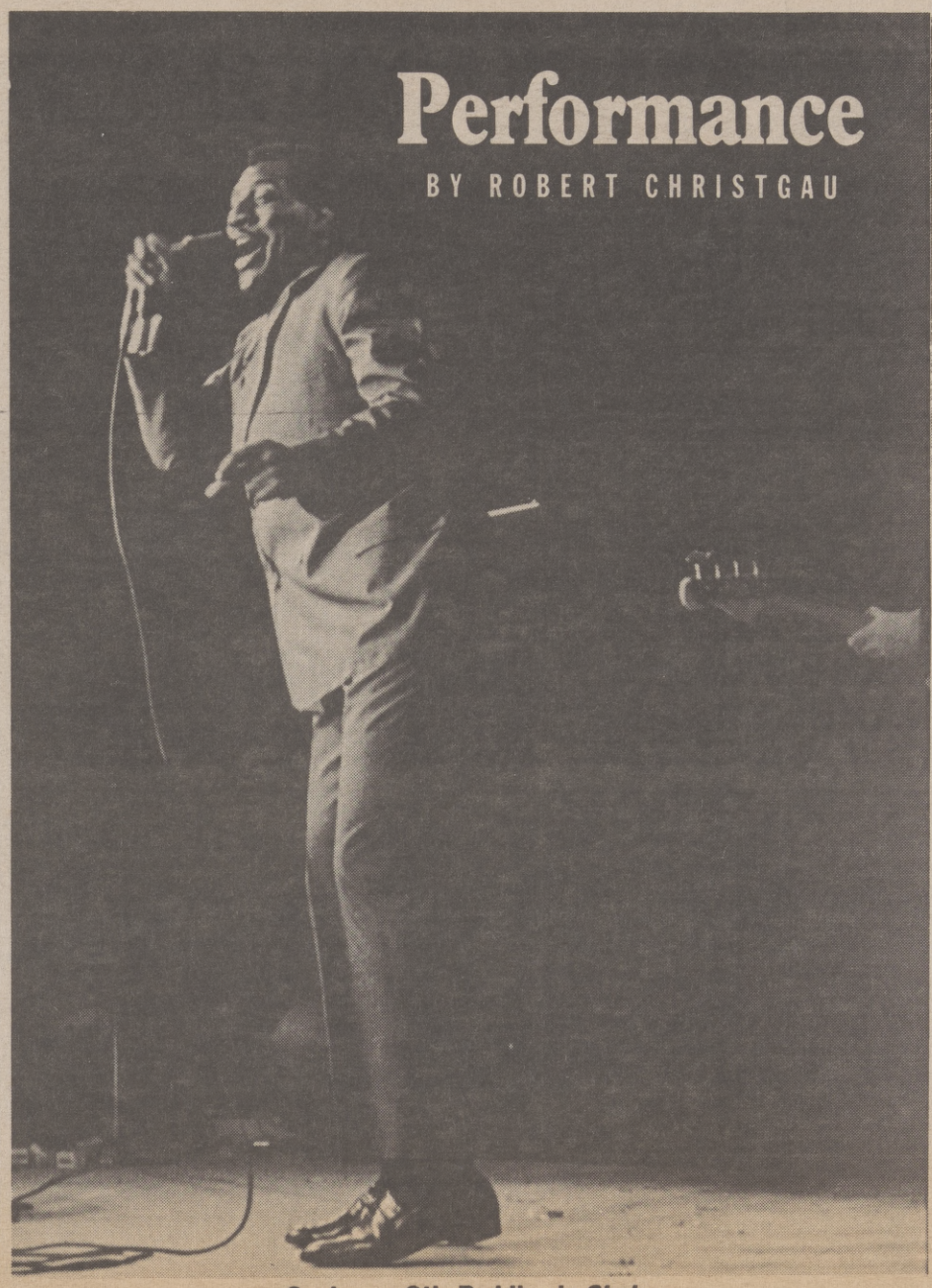
Performance

BY ROBERT CHRISTGAU



Soul man: Otis Redding in *Shake*

JIMI PLAYS MONTEREY. Directed by D. A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus. **SHAKE (OTIS REDDING).** Directed by D. A. Pennebaker, Chris Hegedus, and David Dawkins. **DAYBREAK EXPRESS.** Directed by D. A. Pennebaker. All films distributed by Movie Visions. At Film Forum 1, through July 25.

Never too taken with cinema verité's low-rent perks, D. A. Pennebaker has been a reluctantly ineluctable rockumentarist since *Don't Look Back* caught Bob Dylan in the act and *Monterey Pop* prepared the way for both Woodstock and *Woodstock*. In 1969 he took less than a week to organize production on *Toronto Pop* (later *Keep on Rockin'*, still later *Sweet Toronto*); just last year he contracted to shoot a Depeche Mode feature, group unheard. Outtakes from *Monterey Pop*, a more carefully conceived and realized project, found their way into version two of the Toronto movie. Now he's recycled *Monterey*'s two most undeniable performances into a 20-minute Otis Redding short, *Shake*, and a 50-minute Jimi Hendrix doc, *Jimi Plays Monterey*. Can Janis Joplin, who gigged twice at the festival, be far behind?

The Hendrix movie, plumped up with non-Pennebaker footage from swingin'-era London and accounts of the guitarist's Village days by Monterey honcho-turned-cocaine-survivor John Phillips, is the featured attraction. But *Shake* is the prize. Well-shot vintage soul performances are as scarce as chitlins on Wall Street, and though these 20,000 white protobohemians weren't exactly Redding's hippest audience, he was definitely out to prove something to "the love crowd." Clad in a memorable forest-green suit, the most country of the great soul men trundled his oversized body all over the stage in a condensed set of surefire material. The glaring spotlight effects that spoiled Redding's segment of the original film are mostly gone; except for the girls-of-Monterey montage accompanying "Try a Little Tenderness," Pennebaker honors the visual facts, most notably Redding's bighearted face. In the best verité tradition, Pennebaker is drawn to interesting faces—even his tribute to the ladies doesn't settle for pretty.

By my count, *Jimi Plays Monterey* is the fifth concert documentary devoted solely to Hendrix, and while it may be the best, no one would claim it's definitive. Sure beats *Rainbow Bridge*, say, but the music can't match that sorry film's "Train Kept A-Rollin'," or *Woodstock*'s "Star-Spangled Banner." Music was a given for a Hendrix stuck with topping the Who's guitar-smashing tour de force. It's great sport to watch this outrageous scene-stealer wiggle his tongue, pick with his teeth, and set his ax on fire, but the showboating does distract from the history made that night—the dawning of an instrumental technique so effortlessly fecund and febrile that rock has yet to equal it, though hundreds of metal bands have gotten rich trying.

Admittedly, nowhere else will you witness a Hendrix still uncertain of his divinity. Dead at 27, he was never not young, but he didn't stay this innocent for long. Redding, who would die sooner and younger, was always a little naïve, and never so innocent. Maybe that's the difference between soul and rock. ■

Stiffed

BY JULIE PHILLIPS

WEEKEND AT BERNIE'S. Directed by Ted Kotcheff. Written by Robert Klane. Produced by Victor Drai. Presented by Gladden Entertainment. Released by 20th Century-Fox.

As movies about New York go, *Weekend at Bernie's* is one of the dumbest and tiredest of the whole huge genre. A white-boy's-eye view of summer in the city, it's the story of Larry (Andrew McCarthy) and Rich (*Brighton Beach Memoirs*'s Jonathan Silverman), a would-be East Coast Bill and Ted whining the same old New York whine: Their apartments are too small, they work too hard, they can't get girls, and they can't get out of town for the weekend.

Bernie's begins as a routine caper comedy: Our two potato-faced spastics uncover and report fraud at their company, fraud perpetrated—unbeknownst to them—by their boss, Bernie (Terry Kiser), one of the standard gang of stupid and hapless bad guys. They are invited to Bernie's beach house in the Hamptons for the weekend, with a view to their permanent disposal. On arrival, the boys find Bernie dead and his house overrun by scantily clad women. They decide not to call the cops.

Evolving through a mercifully short beach-party larval stage, *Bernie's* appears in its final form as an extended dead people joke. Bernie is washed away by the

FILM

tide, recovered, used as a puppet, re-murdered twice; none of the locals ever quite catches on that Bernie is more than "just a little wasted." After enough gross dead body jokes, you begin to laugh in spite of yourself. The biggest audience response came when the boys reanchored Bernie's toupee with a staple gun.

The most pathetic aspect of this surfer movie manqué is the shoddiness of these skinny white boys' idea of a good time. The waters of the North Atlantic are gray and poisonous-looking, and the beach house is atrociously ugly, a bourgeois pleasure shack with a wet bar and a modular sofa. Bernie's party guests are all agents, large-breasted women, or aging queens; this is supposed to be funny. (As a buddy movie, *Bernie's* balances unusually large doses of both homoeroticism and homophobia.) And the object of Rich's affections (Catherine Mary Stewart) is the kind of waitress-faced, empty-headed woman that gives me chills. I know it's a tough life in the big city, but even New Yorkers should be able to come up with a better paradise than this.

Director Ted Kotcheff (*North Dallas Forty*, *First Blood*, *Winter People*) makes a cameo appearance in his underwear as Rich's pot-bellied, hairy, disgusting father. It's a revealing moment. One suspects that *Weekend at Bernie's* might not have been such an awful movie if the people who made it had had a sense of shame. ■

The Deep

BY AMY TAUBIN

LICENCE TO KILL. Directed by John Glen. Written by Michael G. Wilson and Richard Maibaum. Produced by Albert R. Broccoli and Wilson. A Danjaq production. Released by United Artists, opening July 14.

"Let's hear this again," says skeptical drug lord Franz Sanchez—head honcho of (ho-ho) Isthmus City—to his trembling minion. "He water-skied behind the plane, jumped on it, threw the pilot out, and flew away?"

"Would I make something like that up?" the minion quavers.

Of course not. We, too, saw 007's sea-and-sky routine, and 90 action-packed minutes later (with no closure in sight), we vaguely remember it. One of the notable aspects of *Licence To Kill* (the original and more suggestive title was *Licence Revoked*) is its two hours-plus running time, though happily the 16th James Bond saga doesn't feel a smidgin longer than it actually is.

Licence To Kill has, as they say, "all the elements"—specifically earth, air, fire, water. With principal locations in the Florida Keys and the Bahamas, most of the action takes place under or over the Atlantic, the Gulf, and the Caribbean. And the finale features a drag race be-

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SF Chronicle Date Book, June 25, 1989

FILM

Michael Wallin

BY TOM LEVY/THE CHRONICLE

Michael Wallin said of his award-winning film 'Decodings': 'I thought it would screen a couple of times and then . . . sit on the shelves'

Personal Story Decoded In Bits of Old Footage

BY CALVIN AHLGREN

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

"DECODINGS" is the 13th film listed by Michael Wallin since he began turning out his technically adventurous, amusing and often experimental works in 1968. For Wallin, the 13th time proved the charm: "Decodings" won a 1988 Phelan Award, given to local film makers, took a first prize at the Athens Film Festival and a Grand Prize at the Thomas Edison Black Maria Festival, and was accepted for the prestigious Whitney Biennial '89 in New York.

Though in some ways the multiple nod acknowledges his longtime devotion to craft, and even his artistic pedigree — Wallin studied with film makers Bruce Baillie, James Broughton and Peter Kubelka — the 41-year-old *cinéaste* was surprised at the interest his latest film generated. "I thought it would screen a couple of times and then go into Canyon [Cinema, the independent film collection/rental facility where he worked for 8½ years, and of whose board he is still a member] and sit on the shelves," he said.

He was the more nonplussed because his latest film is such a departure from previous work. In "Tall Grass" (1968/1980, 15 minutes, silent, color), "Monitoring the Unstable Earth" (1980, 20 minutes, color), "Fearful Symmetry" (1981, 15 minutes, silent, color) and "Along the Way" (1983, 20 minutes, color) — all showing with "Decodings" Tuesday night at Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley — Wallin deals with images from the natural world, recorded by and interpreted through his camera lens. "Decodings" (1988, 15 minutes, black and white) uses images gleaned from industrial and commercial film from the 1940s and 1960s.

Coming out of a period of several dry years during which personal problems — the breakup of a 10-year relationship and a months-long crisis with an injured back — kept him from film making, Wallin had approached "Decodings" as an opportunity for both renewal and breakthrough. He had written a very personal statement that he hoped to use as the basis for a script, but realized that its very intimacy — Wallin called it a "psychosexual

Michael Wallin's "Decodings" and other films screen at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at Pacific Film Archive, 2625 Durant Avenue in Berkeley.

A pulsing heart is one of the many images used in 'Decodings'

tale" — could work against the film process he envisioned. "It was too confessional, too obvious," he said. In its raw state, "it would have worked to close off instead of open up the images."

So he turned to an old friend, doctor and writer Michael Blumlein, to fashion the piece into a script. What emerged from their collaboration is an elliptical track that chases poetry, science fiction, satire and narrative fiction through a story charged with personal emotions that flash like summer lightning.

"Of course, it was a scary process," he said. "I'd never given up any creative control" in film making. "Basically I want my films to be expressions of *my* vision. So it was a difficult process, but ultimately very satisfying ... I was getting some objective feedback from somebody who knew what was happening."

Wallin perceived the visual end — his first use of found footage — as a novelty that he believed he could handle with professional detachment. "I thought I could be more ruthless because the footage was not my own. But once I'd chosen about an hour's worth to work with, aiming toward a 15-minute film, it became a challenge."

That was based in his intent both to avoid clichés of the genre ("fascinating, but usually dealt with

'It was a scary process'

in very trite fashion: for easy laughs or stock value or to hammer home political messages") and to pursue the personal statement that began with his own writing. "Going through these thousands and thousands of feet of film, I realized I wanted to use this ["Decodings"] to say something about myself." That viewpoint worked in his favor, he said. "Some of my film maker friends have said, 'I could see you having shot those images.' It's of the same period and style as when I was growing up."

The old radio drama feel to the narrative suits the archaic look of the images, without forced attempts at matching specifics. The pacing of the film proceeds with the seeming inevitability of a musical composition. One laughs at vignettes of Chaplinesque antics — a

See Page 40

ny, Pacific Film Fund, she was one ments."

WALLIN

Continued From Page 37

group of boys piling into the surf, a stunt driver in a bulky old coupe bursting through a wall of flame — or hushes at a brief retelling of a sexual encounter, or flinches at the sight of a beating human heart surgically revealed in an operating-room sequence so baldly presented that at first it seems to be trick photography.

The images were "somehow terribly evocative of my past," Wallin said, "all the resonances and subtexts of things we were forbidden to talk and think about when I was growing up ... It's still fascinating to me to use this material that had such rich psychological underpinnings ... One of the aspects I felt was successful was the way the text broadened the implications of the images, and the way the images were pushed into metaphor."

Both technically and emotionally, "Decodings" represents a stretch for Wallin. His previous three works, "Monitoring the Unstable Earth," "Fearful Symmetry" and "Along the Way," are characterized by technical density and a sort of mechanical restlessness (Wallin calls this "camera strategies"). To be sure, the films are successful on their own terms, and offer much to intrigue a viewer, from transcendentally lit seashores to San Francisco skylines blissed out in rivers of fog, to modern buildings that pulse and glow with an unearthly intensity.

The time of making the trilogy "was a very creative period for me," Wallin said. "I'd come on different ways of moving and framing the camera — all those pans and tilts and using the polarizing filter. Basically I was experimenting with all the tools available to me, short of optical printing."

His aim, he said, was to catch the familiar in ways that would break through bonds of habitual perception, stimulating the viewer to see anew. "I felt I'd come across a technique that enabled me to convey a sense of being somewhere, in a place that was quite powerful: the colors, the light, the forms, all that stuff. I wanted to transcend the notion of just having the films be seen as records of being somewhere."

AFTER the exhilaration of making "Decodings," Wallin said he is ready to try further collaboration. His next film, however, will hew to his original line of filming the natural world, not rummaging in found-footage bins. Tuesday's PFA showing of his work closes a tour that's taken him to the East Coast and around the country. In the spring of 1990, he said, the Museum of Modern Art in New York will give a one-man show of his films. "After that," he quipped, "I'll retire. It'll be the Boardwalk and Park Place of film making." ■

ARTFORUM

INTERNATIONAL

SEPTEMBER 1989 $7.00

Eleanor Antin, *The Last Night of Rasputin*, 1989, 16mm film with performance. From the 1989 Biennial.

was, therefore, what I deserved; no better, no worse.

The curators' jaundiced viewpoint did not prevent them from installing their show with a didacticism that bordered on a parody of art appreciation. A blonde wood box suspended on the leg of a sculpture by Joel Shapiro (*Untitled*, 1987) led the eye to an orange box in a painting by Andrew Spence (*Bulletin Board*, 1988–89); a bird's-eye view of two periwinkle shapes in another Spence painting (*Swivel Chairs*, 1988) then segued to the same color in the 10,000 objects comprising Allan McCollum's *Individual Works*, 1987–88. Curiously, I flashed to the opening sequence of the movie *Heathers*, in which a color-coordinated croquet game sends up hyper-esthetisized art direction. I wondered, Could this be the curators' first foray into a deconstruction of traditional esthetics?

While the curators identified "fluidity and ambiguity" as dominant features of today's art, they often imposed interpretive certainty on the work at hand. Consider the gallery that contained work by McCollum, Cindy Bernard, and Sherrie Levine: It successfully levelled them all to an engagement with the myth of artistic originality. The institutional context here revealed how this once critical, now potentially remunerative engagement has acquired a mythic cultural function all its own. Equally memorable was the wreck-room-from-Hell thematic that wed Donald Baechler's three enormous paintings, Chris Macdonald's giant tinker toy, and Mike Kelley's four stubbornly distinct objects: two stuffed animal combines, one mind-expanding satanic candle sculpture, and a painting—*Hierarchical Figure*, 1989—that stacks lugubrious comic-strip renderings onto ludicrous ones, and tops the whole thing off with a single red ribbon.

Kelley's unseemly art really stood out in this setting, in that it defied this Biennial's tendency to equate esthetic quality with antiseptic perfectionism or with the presence of refined, in some cases merely arcane, artistic technique. To be sure, the development of such art is neither historically unwarranted, nor is it necessarily a bad thing. Early in this decade, a glut of neo-expressionist junk did us all the favor of proving the bankruptcy of a once-liberating tradition of technical directness that began, arguably, with Edouard Manet. Throughout this decade, many artists have cleaned up their acts. Some have learned lessons about the value of modest and unlikely material decisions from, among others, Robert Ryman. Still other artists, such as Ross Bleckner, have taught themselves what could be learned about extinct painting practices from books and from looking at older art. This has helped distance their painting from the false spontaneity and degenerate machismo that, together, usually served as alibis for slovenliness. The involvement with technique also furnished these painters with a means of recovering a wealth of imagery that—because of its decorative, premodern, or sometimes even religious character—has been "forbidden." This technical engagement has provided them with a less alienated—precisely because indirect—method of production.

In this context, Robert Gober's art comes to mind, because its effect is generated not by the labor he expends on making, say, a dog's bed or a scary variation on the theme of a child's playpen, but by the thoughts and emotions that these simple objects can embrace. Whatever goes into the works' fabrication, while central to Gober's process, is not really the point. But by juxtaposing his works with Joan Nelson's distressed landscapes, where facture bears the burden of the works' effect, the curators seemed to have arrived at precisely the opposite conclusion.

Labor intensity of the most ostentatious kind or byzantine technical wizardry now stoke an indiscriminate marketplace with a wealth of seductive, sometimes beautiful, sometimes merely fussy works of art whose surfaces are more fetishized, more lavished with special effects that anything seen since the days of Gustave Moreau. Today's art buyers are hardly adverse to the material signifiers of virtuosity, or anyway of "hard work." And as the curators of this Biennial cautioned, the marketplace has the power to influence artistic output. All of which makes me wonder all over again why they chose this path of least resistance.

The marketplace these curators love and hate also regularly induces artists to exhibit works that under different economic circumstances might never have left their studios. In this society, you take what you're given. And that, I suppose, is the key to another contradiction in this year's Biennial. As emphatic as its organizers claimed to be about searching for significant new art, this survey contained so much that was familiar and/or indifferent; even, in some cases, by artists who had done better work during the previous two years. Is it enough to say that institutions like the Whitney are now as abject in their relationships to certain contemporary dealers as your average art-buying millionaire? Somehow I don't think so.

—David Deitcher

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1989 BIENNIAL (FILM AND VIDEO)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Despite the limitations inherent in trying to select from two years of work, the film and video section of the Whitney Biennial represented an impressive range of work that pointed to an even greater range of possibilities. In the face of the thin sliver of choices sanctioned by the dominant market forces of film and television, a tropical forest of rare and beautiful work continues to hang on elsewhere and by other means. Mainstream film has generally been forced to abandon two of its greatest resources: the use of black and white stock, with its potential for dramatic conflict, and a conscious display of the relation of cinema's present forms to its past ones. A number of films shown here, such as Michael Wallin's *Decodings*, 1988, and Abigail Child's *Mayhem*, 1987, used one or both of these resources to achieve outstanding results. Just as remarkable are the rapid advances made in the use of video over the past few years. I walked away exhilarated by the work, but dismayed at how little known much of it remains.

Archival analysis (*arke*, a Greek word from which "archival" derives, means both "power" and "origin") was evident in many works, whether or not they made use of archival footage. Su Friedrich's film *Damned If You Don't*, 1987, emphasizes the viewer's relation to its narrative by intercutting the story of a lesbian relationship between a nun and a woman artist with portions of two other earlier representations of the sexuality of nuns. These other accounts include the voice of a former nun relating her own experiences, extracts read from a nun's confessions during a trial in medieval Europe, and scenes taken from the film *Black Narcissus*, 1947, depicting a nun falling in love with a man. The images Friedrich chooses to film not only seductively advance the story she is telling, but also raise questions of representation through the juxtaposition of narratives.

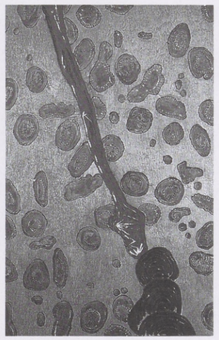
Martha Rosler's video *Born to Be Sold. Martha Rosler Reads the Strange Case of Baby S M*, 1988, examines the forces of class and gender as they influence the issue of surrogacy, its legality, and the motivations of those involved. One method Rosler uses to accomplish this is to select and comment on footage from major network news coverage of the highly publicized court case. She argues that the same class considerations that determine television advertising also determine that the news will favor the professional family trying to adopt the baby girl over the working class "biological" mother. Another technique Rosler employs is the ingenious use of handcrafted stage sets that evoke both the early days of television and household crafts. The video effectively works to demystify television, to bring it closer to the creative and analytic possibilities residing in the viewer's own experiences.

Jason Simon's video *Production Notes: Fast Food for Thought*, 1987, allows successive examples of slick television ads to play themselves out unimpinged, then shows them again in slow-motion, accompanied by a narration consisting mostly of notes from the advertising agency to the production company. Listening to the words that helped to dictate the image, the viewer becomes aware of how carefully premeditated are the strategies that drive these portrayals of innocence, simple fun, and the good life. By leaving the advertisements intact, by simply slowing them down and changing the soundtrack, Simon has found a way to attract the same audience, but with a much more problematic, oppositional message.

Works by two artists in particular reflect the extraordinary diversity and depth of the film and video in this year's Biennial. Leslie Thornton's videos *Peggy and Fred in Kansas* and *Peggy and Fred and Pete*, both 1987, construct, through a disparate use of styles, childhood among post-futuristic ruins, where the major portion of time is spent underground. Thornton's videos, shot on black-and-white film then assembled on video, memorably depict a fragmented world where neither ecosystems, salvaged as snippets of film, nor childhood grant the viewer an uncomplicated point of reference. Sandy Moore's film *Reverse Transcriptase*, 1989, takes for its structure the replication and replacement of the DNA molecule by the HIV virus. A limited number of cartoon images and Moore's drawings are each tagged to a unit of the DNA compound. The images flicker past the eye at an ever greater pace: the impressive result, simply put, is that they bring to mind how AIDS is culturally constructed, while at the same time undermining this construction as a simple cliché. By engaging timely issues with innovative responses, these works, as well as the film and video section as a whole, provided the Biennial with much-needed connections to the world outside the museum.

—Richard C. Ledes

Donald Moffett, *I Am the Judge and Jury Here*, 1989, backlit Cibachrome transparency, 25½ × 26 × 4".



Fidel Marquez, *Tócame (Touch me)*, 1989, mixed media on canvas, 96 × 60".

●

DONALD MOFFETT

WESSEL O'CONNOR LTD.

Gran Fury, an art collective of AIDS activists, has been one of the strongest presences in the art world of late, despite the fact that its propagandistic works are pointedly not intended for commercial galleries. Rather, Gran Fury's métier is the exterior walls of buildings, the t-shirt—places normally reserved for advertising—and, very occasionally, the alternative, nonprofit space friendly to leftist and/or gay art. The collective's numbers include several artists who also work individually, among them Donald Moffett. His photography-based work is a fascinating and subtle permutation of Gran Fury's original project; namely, the incendiary manipulation of visual language. While Moffett is also concerned with representing a gay sensibility made more socially responsible by the presence of AIDS, he makes room for what some activists have called an "esthetic gray area," especially in his bold, if tactical, interest in titillation.

For this show, Moffett utilized a format which is increasingly prevalent in outdoor public advertising—the backlit photographic image. In his case, each image is a two-foot-square Cibachrome transparency adhered to Plexiglas and bolted to a same-size lightbox. Shot by the artist off monitors showing commercial gay pornographic videos, the subject matter ranges from glistening upper body parts to frozen scenes of masturbation and, in one case, anal penetration. Moffett interrupts these pictures with a line of text, sometimes several lines, to magnify the particular feelings suggested by the models' poses, and to emphasize the present danger inherent in their desires. In one of the strongest pieces, *I Am the Judge and Jury Here*, 1989, a tightly cropped pair of buttocks fills the lower half of the frame. A vague penis shaft juts vertically from the crack, disappearing into the blackness that frames the title line. The body parts, doubly distanced by having been filmed then rephotographed from an already eroded video likeness, retain their sensuality while appearing spookily translucent. The text acts both as a watchdog guarding the privacy of the models' chosen sexual practice, and as a kind of wolf in sheep's clothing, the sheep in this case being the media's uncritical use of erotica as an advertising come-on.

In one sense, Moffett's work belongs with that of Barbara Kruger, Gretchen Bender, Richard Prince, and others who muddy imagery with language, and vice versa. Still, the comparison is an uneasy one. When Bender, for example, prints the phrase "People with AIDS" on the screen of an otherwise normal television set, she is essentially decorating the medium with her message. Their mutual exclusivity is the basis of her point. Moffett's lines of "commentary" are far more symbiotic with, and sympathetic to, his chosen images—something like the discreetly placed translated dialogue in foreign films, though more imaginatively arranged. Another difference is Moffett's voice, which is less the single, generic everyvoice of Kruger than a collection of disparate voices, whose insistent points vary widely in tone—from the stoic ("Safe Journey to Some Safe Place," goes the sentiment crowning twin heads of a man mid-orgasm) to the vulnerable (a hand masturbating a penis receives the moniker "I'm Never Never Never Letting Go.") The results effectively cross a strong and specific ethical conscience with an equally strong modus operandi.

—Dennis Cooper

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FIDEL MARQUEZ

56, BLEECKER GALLERY

Fidel Marquez is an exotic, even weirdly Gauginesque artist, but his large canvases and small drawings are more like tropical takes on the personal than vice versa. His paintings may be abstract but it doesn't take long to dig up the source of his imagery: namely, that jungle seen in X rays of the human body and through biologists' microscopes. Marquez isolates and enlarges biological shapes, giving them the festive coloration and sprawl of a botanical wonderland. Sometimes he adds a layer of beads to accentuate the party atmosphere, but more often the additions are mock-sloppy—drips, gunks, and curds of almost fluorescent acrylic, suggesting decay, rot, and destruction. That these marks seem to imply a kind of physical illness is clearest in works such as *Love Boom*, 1988, in which a very phallic purple-and-white spire deflates against a background of suspiciously spermy-looking blue clouds, or in the somewhat similar *Tócame* (Touch me,

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TEN GLORIOUS YEARS
Cinema of Women look back at the last decade

SNAKES AND LADDERS
International Film & Video in Lucerne

ANIMATION UPDATE
Bristol Animation Festival & In Transit

FEMINIST FILM
Virgin Machine

COMPUTER DESIGN
William Latham

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NEWS

& MORE

The author's *Swimmer*, on show at Viper.

SNAKES AND LADDERS

Viper 89, one of the major European Film & Video Festivals took place in Switzerland in October, and was a good example of a successful cultural venture, from which Britain's Philistine funders could well learn a lesson or two. Michael Maziere reports from one of Europe's many exciting events.

THE FIRST THING I noticed when flying into Switzerland was the sheer graphic and orderly nature of the landscape: fields and forests with razor cut edges, houses and farms orderly, clean and ideally set in their perfect surroundings. Hackney to Zurich is like being beamed down to Toy Town from a blitzed post industrial urban jungle.

The Lucerne Viper Film & Video Festival was, this year, celebrating its 10th anniversary with a programme consisting of four sections: Women's Retrospectives; Current International; Informational and Swiss Video Arts, plus some Multi-Media (Film/Music/Installation) pieces. The Viper Festival was started in 1980 in Kriens as a small, non-funded open festival of Swiss film, video and performance. From its humble beginnings, it has gone through a metamorphosis, typical of the 80s: it moved to a central location in a larger town, became more selective, gathered financial support in the form of grants and sponsorship and took on an international perspective.

The European festival circuit in the film and video sector is extensive and Britain has historically been left off the map, remaining isolated, partly through its geographical situation and partly through a kind of dubious cultural protectionism. Within the annual festival circuit, Viper is one of many European events presenting a national and regional selection against the background of a high profile international programme. This type of programming could be very beneficial for any future British Film & Video festivals: placing British work beyond its usual restrictive boundaries, and up against a wider cultural field. Britain will, after all, be part of the European open market in 1992.

During the six days of screenings a wide range of work was shown, both historical work and selected contemporary programmes. The programming was sensible, with the retrospectives starting at 1pm and the main programmes beginning at 4pm through to midnight, allowing an hour's break for dinner. For the purpose of a wide representation, many European festivals have different categories of programming. The Viper, Berlin, Oberhausen and Osnabruck shows run a highly selective 'films in competition' section, as well as Informa-

Decodings: Michael Wallin (USA)

tion Programmes, where various institutions can exhibit their best recent work. At Viper, Richard Philpott & Tom Heslop presented a programme from The London Film-makers Co-op to an enthusiastic full house.

Combined with the international programme and the retrospectives, such a structure provides a flexible yet comprehensive range of viewing, a successful compromise between the totally curated and totally open submission event.

This formula was seen to work, as there was a large range of very striking films and tapes screened at Viper. *The Last Days of Contrition*, by Canadian Richard Kerr, is a highly-charged and accomplished condemnation of American politics via a journey through the desert of New Mexico. As a kind of apocalyptic experimental venture, with its vast pans of the barren landscape and images of American iconography (reminiscent of Robert Frank's photographs in *The Americans*), the film displays the aggressive isolation of the North American post war condition.

Metakta, by The Aleinikov Brothers from the Soviet Union, is a kaleidoscopic piece of montage, based on found sound and visual material. Although reminiscent of the films of Bruce Conner and latter-day scratch video, the film operates on a different cultural and aesthetic set of references. Peter Gidal's recent description of it in *Undercut* Magazine translated well the tempo and excitement of the film: "Neg.. car.. gas masks... glowing... operatic (screaming/screeching sound)... missiles, submarine, tanks, [illegible] lights...(kitchmusic). Black & white interior shots... not neg anymore... film maker's back... slow turn of head... sits high on a chair, like Eisenstein? Montage on steps of Odessa... Chile... montage (organ blasts). Death..."

On a similar note, but with state-of-the-art technology, New York-based Paul Garrin's *Free Society* transmits its political message crudely yet efficiently. An accomplished piece, *Free Society* uses sophisticated computer-generated images of police and military marches against a spectrum of riot footage from across the worlds: the tape is as much a condemnation of state brutality as a celebration of high technology. While *Free Society* appears somewhat naive and clichéd, *Metakta* is confused and somewhat unfocused: the revelation of sufficient cultural differences?

On a more humorous note, Sharon Sandusky from Chicago was presenting her most recent film, *C'mon Babe*, a pure montage film put together with footage from an amazing 60s documentary on the lemming's race to death. Described as the *Blue Velvet* of documentary, *C'mon Babe* is a hilarious and frighteningly perceptive metaphor on the human condition. Cut to the German parting song, *Danke Schon*, the extraordinary images of lemmings in their relentless pursuit of death presents history and collective activity as an intensely manic behaviour.

Sandusky works as an archivist and her choice of footage was particularly original. Michael Wallin's *Decodings* also used found material, albeit more readily available and sensational. *Decodings* is a study of masculinity and subjective development through a kaleidoscopic montage of heroic male images. Men jumping out of planes, boys boxing, car stunts and war heroes are cut to a mesmeric monologue, which touches on philosophy, homosexuality and childhood. This gathering of images from the register of the collective male unconscious is powerful in that it creates the early fascination and questions of the young male child. The film remains a passionate and subjective statement on the male collective history, delving into the influences and counter-influences which form our subjectivities.

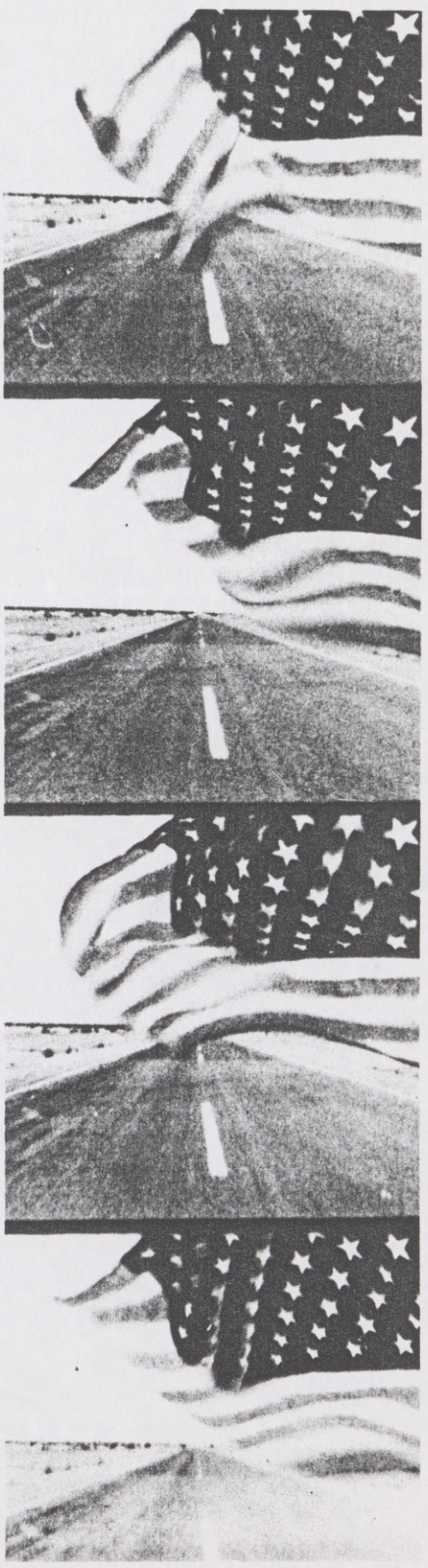
Much of the Swiss video section was not particularly innovative or experimental, apart from Stephane Goel's *Loin du Coeur* and Marie Antoinette & Daniel Chiaranza-Hauser's *Iceland Trilogy*. The latter was a rather humorous tape, a kind of allegorical message on the European community spirit.

Aside from these new pieces, the festival presented works by Yvonne Rainer, Derek Jarman, Rose Lowder, Stan Brakhage, Caroel Schneeman and Gary Hill to name but a few. The works that I found the most inspiring were those already described, which lie at the juncture between post-modernist collage and an experimental quality, weaving a collective imaginary within a personal and subliminal experience.

With various British film and video festivals planned for the next two years, a wide variety of international work should be surfacing in Britain (redressing vital issues for video-art and experimental film), as is already happening regularly in much of Europe and North America.

Netakta, C'mon Babe and *Decodings* are available through The London Filmmakers Co-op distribution on 01-586 4806.

Free Society is available through London Video Access on 01-437 2786.



The Last Days Of Contrition: Richard Kerr Canada.

"Vault," which starts off the KCOS film series, is not your normal soap opera.

"Loose Ends" by Chick Strand uses found footage to show sadness of the human condition.

Film series goes from surreal to simplistic

Five-part special on PBS is a showcase for nation's top independent filmmakers

Short works by independent filmmakers will be presented in a five-part series beginning Wednesday on KCOS Channel 13 (PBS). All will be shown at 8:30 p.m.

El Paso filmmaker Willie Varela produced the series with grants from the Texas Commission on the Arts and the City of El Paso Arts Resources Department.

"I consulted with various artists, asked about their latest works and what would play on television," Varela said. "I want to make some kind of message with each program." He said he will give a brief introduction before each program.

The films and their viewing dates:

Wednesday — "Vault" by Bruce and Norman Yonemoto and "More TV Stories" by Ilene Segalove.

"Vault," Varela said, is a videotape that "attempts to subvert the expectations of the traditional soap opera, a media expression well known to many."

"More TV Stories" combines several short stories in an effort to demonstrate that everyone has a relationship with a television set — as an object with certain placement in the livingroom, kitchen, den or bedroom, Varela said.

July 18 — New York sculptor and filmmaker Robert Breer's animation technique is of the simplist type; he draws his figures on index cards and films them with a 16mm movie camera.

"Breer uses very modest means to create very elegant and accomplished statements. They definitely don't look cheap or slapdash," Varela said.

Three Breer works will be shown: "LMNO," "Swiss Army Knife with Rats and Pigeons" and "Trial Balloons."

Aug. 1 — The Henry Hills film "Money" and the Lewis Klahr works "Picture Books for Adults: Deep Fish Tank Birding/Enchantment" and "Pulls," will be featured.

"Money": A first-timer's look at New York.

"Money," Varela said, "is truly about New York — it encompasses the craziness and frenzy the first-time visitor to New York would experience."

"Picture Books for Adults: Deep Fish Tank Birding/Enchantment," by Lewis Klahr, is filmed on Super 8 mm, the "home movie medium" of the 1950s.

Varela called Klahr's pieces "strange and surrealistic."

"Pulls" and Breer's work "A Man and His Dog Out for Air" will also be shown.

Aug. 8 — Two works each by Kuchar and Michael Wallin are featured.

San Franciscoan Kuchar makes darkly humorous works that reflect his concerns with Hollywood, UFOs, the weather, sexual angst and the demands of role playing.

"He's recognized as the true comedian of the underground," Varela said, and added that Kuchar is, "the most unusual, idiosyncratic artist I've had the pleasure to know." He said that one of his trademark quirks is weather footage, which he frequently films near El Reno, Okla.

Aug. 29 — "Loose Ends," a film collage that uses a number of sources of found footage to show deep sadness about the human condition, will be shown Aug. 29.

This award-winning film by Los Angeles filmmaker Chick Strand was shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art biennial exhibition.

"Chick makes very personal films, testaments to her own reactions to a foreign culture," Varela said. She has made many films in Mexico.

El Paso Herald-Post 7/5/90

MISCELLANY

KCOS to showcase new films

A showcase of new films and videos will return to the airwaves next week.

"Out of the Mainstream: A Television Showcase for New Film and Video" will present five programs featuring new works. They begin at 8:30 p.m. Wednesdays on KCOS, Channel 13.

Local filmmaker Willie Varela is executive producer of the series, which is in its second season.

The first installment at 8 p.m. Wednesday will feature two selections:

"Vault," by Bruce and Norman Yonemoto, is a stylized romance between a woman pole vaulter/concert cellist and a cowboy/abstract expressionist painter. The Yonemoto brothers use visual and thematic cliches of TV soap operas and Hollywood melodramas.

"More TV Stories" by Ilene Segalove is a series of humorous vignettes satirizing the relationship between people and their TV sets.

The second installment at 8:30 p.m. July 18 will feature four animated films by New York sculptor and filmmaker Robert Breer. For these shorts, he draws on index cards, then shoots each drawing a frame at a time with a 16mm camera.

Three films will air at 8:30 p.m. Aug. 1: "Money," a collage of New York streets; "Picture Books for Adults" and "Pulls."

"I, an Actress" will air at 8:30 p.m. Aug. 8. It depicts a director coaching a student about playing a love scene. "Decoding" uses old documentatries and newsreels from the '40s to the '60s. The final program will feature "Loose Ends" at 8:30 p.m Aug. 29.

Varela eyes other filmmakers

Series of movies by colleagues will start tonight on Channel 13

By Robbie Farley-Villalobos
Herald-Post entertainment editor

Filmmaker Willie Varela isn't content making his own films.

He wants to tout the work of colleagues and spends months selecting, editing and producing a show for viewers in his hometown.

His second series of new videos and films begins at 8:30 p.m. today on KCOS, Channel 13. "Out of the Mainstream: A Television Showcase for New Film and Video" will include a total of five half-hour shows at 8:30 p.m. Wednesdays.

Tonight's first installment will feature "Vault" by Bruce and Norman Yonemoto, a romance between a woman pole vaulter/concert cellist and a cowboy/abstract expressionist painter, and "More TV Stories" by Ilene Segalove, vignettes that satirize the relationship between people and their television sets.

Other dates include:

- 8:30 p.m. July 18, four animated films by New York sculptor and filmmaker Robert Breer.
- 8:30 p.m. Aug. 1, "Money" by Henry Hills and Lewis Klahr's "Picture Books for Adults" and "Pulls."
- 8:30 p.m. Aug. 8, San Francisco videomaker George Kuchar's "I, an Actress" and Mihael Wallin's "Decoding."
- 8:30 p.m. Aug. 29, Chick Strand's "Loose Ends."

Varela planted the seeds for the project by offering one contemporary work on El Paso's public television station in 1988. Last summer, KCOS agreed to present four programs of various original works and now his series has grown to include five programs.

Varela said discussions are under way to package the "Out of the Mainstream" series for other PBS stations to buy.

The project is supported by the Texas Commission on the Arts and the city's Arts Resources Department, with KCOS offering production support.

"I'm excited not only about the quality and intelligence of this series, but the packaging, too. Those who saw last year's shows will be impressed with the improvement in look. It has a contemporary look from the opening credits and taped intro to the closing and music."

— Willie Varela

He said recent improvements in equipment at KCOS gave him the opportunity to upgrade this year's programs to create something unique in local television offerings.

"I'm excited not only about the quality and intelligence of this series, but the packaging, too," Varela said. "Those who saw last year's shows will be impressed with the improvement in look. It has a contemporary look from the opening credits and taped intro to the closing and music."

When Varela, an English teacher at Guillen School, isn't making his own films or poring over catalogues and videotapes from his colleagues across the nation, he is keeping up with television listings.

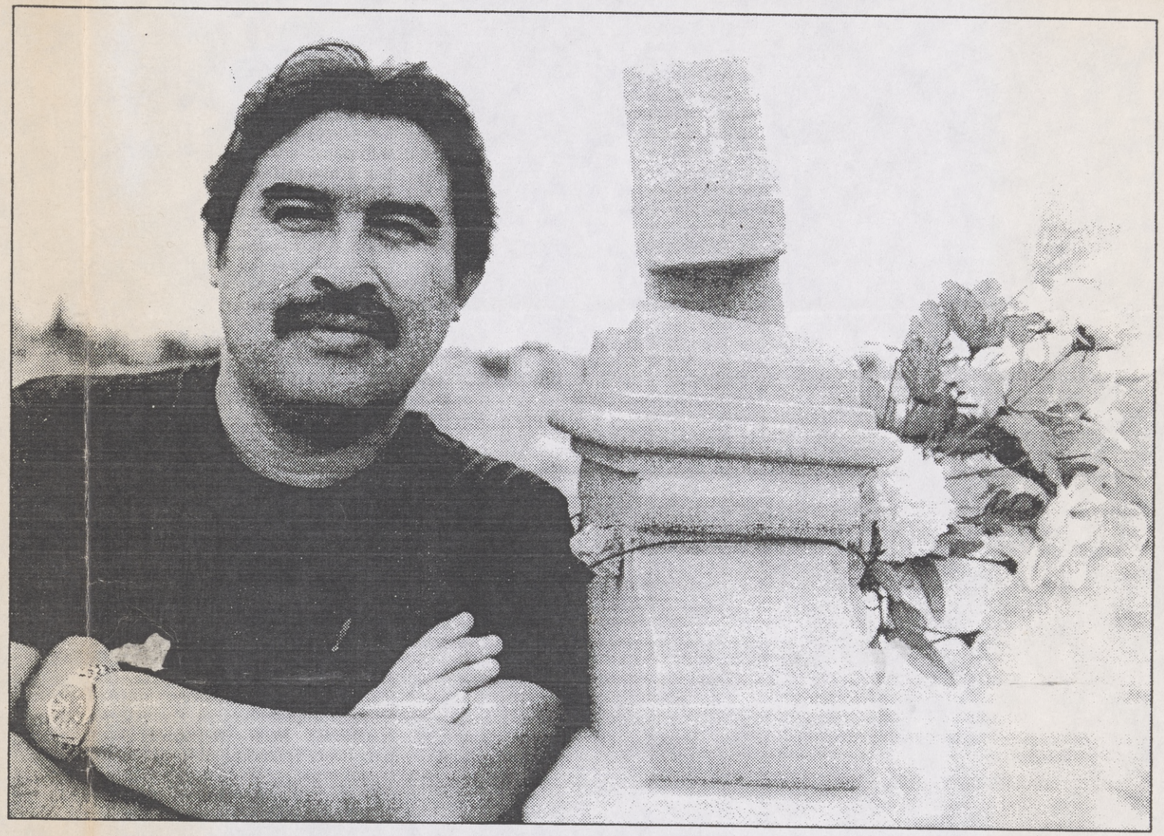
"We've got to do everything we can to avail ourselves of good films and videos. Just scour the TV guide and use the VCR to build your own collection of significant classics and films that are canons in the industry," Varela said.

The 40-year-old filmmaker, who travels the nation lecturing and presenting his more than 70 independent films, has made El Paso his home base. The Jesuit High School graduate will be in charge of a series of new works to be presented through UT El Paso's art department this fall.

One example of Varela's expertise and national acclaim came with a restrospective of his films at New York City's Museum of Modern Art in 1988, and he regularly receives invitations to present his works on lecture tours.

Varela said he plans to continue the "Out of the Mainstream" series.

"My duties as a full-time worker and a husband and father take much time. But I will continue the series as long as the support and my energy lasts."



Acclaimed independent filmmaker Willie Varela has produced a television series on new films and videos that airs Wednesday on El Paso's Public Television station, KCOS, Channel 13.

'OUT OF THE MAINSTREAM'

"Out of the Mainstream: A Television Showcase for New Film and Video" will include a total of five half-hour shows at 8:30 p.m. Wednesdays on KCOS., Channel 13. The programs include:

- **Tonight** — "Vault" by Bruce and Norman Yonemoto, a romance between a woman pole vaulter/concert cellist and a cowboy/abstract expressionist painter, and "More TV Stories" by Ilene Segalove, vignettes that satirize the relationship between people and their television sets.
- **July 18** — Four animated films by New York sculptor and filmmaker Robert Breer.
- **Aug. 1** — "Money" by Henry Hills and Lewis Klahr's "Picture Books for Adults" and "Pulls."
- **Aug. 8** — San Francisco videomaker George Kuchar's "I, an Actress" and Mihael Wallin's "Decoding."
- **Aug. 29** — Chick Strand's "Loose Ends."

MetroGuide

The South Bay's Guide to Movies, Music, Art, Theater & Television

Edited by Michael S. Gant

Forbidden Frames

The Festival of Moving Images screens three potent underground films about sexual identity—physical and psychological—by Jean Genet, Michael Wallin and Jo Menell

BY RICHARD VON BUSACK

The familiar leadership of the hysterical anti-smut crusade is being joined by ranks of fresh, young know-nothings such as Dana Rohrabacher, a Republican congressman from, you guessed it, Orange County, who now moonlights as an art critic, telling NBC News: "This is nonsense. This is utter nonsense. A monkey could do this." Rohrabacher and others want to police the National Endowment of the Arts to ensure that it doesn't finance works that contain sexuality, blasphemy and just plain bad manners in them. When the US Congress tries to give the nation a lesson in morality *and* aesthetics, look out.

The Festival of Moving Images has brought controversial work to the downtown area before, but the films scheduled for Saturday are perhaps the most censorable yet. Spiritually, but not officially, aligned with the concurrent Festival for Freedom of Expression taking place in San Francisco, the San Jose screening will include Jean Genet's homoerotic *Un Chant d'Amour* (*A Love Song*), Michael Wallin's *Decodings* and Jo Menell's *Dick*—three films that address the "forbidden" issues of how people think and act sexually.

Locked up at age 12, French author Jean Genet was a prisoner most of his life until he was finally discovered by Jean-Paul Sartre, who promoted Genet's writings and dubbed him "a saint." Upon petition by the philosopher and other French intellectuals, Genet was eventually released.

Un Chant d'Amour, a short, silent film he made in 1950, focuses on two prisoners in separate cells communicating as best they can about their sexual desires. The central metaphor of the film is a handful of flowers swung on a bit of string by one prisoner, the bundle always just missing the grasp of the prisoner in the other cell. The film exhibits extraordinary compassion and explicit sexuality for its time, and the camerawork is almost phenomenally good.

Michael Wallin's *Decodings* collages found footage from 1950s documentaries and industrial films to evoke, in an oblique way, memories of a childhood in that decade. A narration track by Wallin and collaborator Michael Blumlein tells stories about a boy's psychosexual development that mesh with the images: a meeting with a Marine in the desert, a tale of a friend who loved violent storms and a reminiscence about being a boy, "lying on the back seat of his parents' car . . . nothing is expected of him, nothing at all." The somber music of Shostakovich sets the elegiac mood of the film.

Wallin, who was raised in Los Altos, found his footage through a company in New Jersey that sells old industrial and documentary films. "I used the collective imagery bank," he explained, "to sort out childhood and adolescence as refracted through the images. These were poignant to me, because of the subtext. I like to play with the notion of corrupted innocence—this itself has a subtext with sexual and violent undertones. I wanted to imply the idea of how boys' games become men's games—the context in which our culture allows them to be in physical contact is either sports or war."

Jo Menell has been making films in dangerous places for decades: South Africa, Vietnam, Haiti—and now, inside your pants. Menell, a South African, made *Inside South Africa*, one of the first films to demonstrate how US corporations were propping up the regime there. Menell, who lives in Bolinas, has also collaborated with Jonathan Demme on two excellent documentaries, *Sun City* and *Haiti: Dreams of Democracy*.

Menell will appear in person at the screening with his new film, *Dick*, a funny and profound short about an uncomfortable subject: namely, the human penis. Over several months, Menell photographed in black and white approximately 1000 male organs (in repose, some will be sorry to hear), then recorded different women discussing their feelings about penises: likes and dislikes, theories on the importance of size, and tips on handicapping potential length.

It's a delightful short, even though one might agree with Menell's friend Bernardo Bertolucci, who commented on the films's "tragic subtext." The harmless, necessary penis does have a way of terrifying both owner and members of the opposite (or same) sex who come into contact with one—not to mention granting agencies. In a phone interview, Menell discussed the uproar the documentary spurred in Marin.

"I think the Mapplethorpe [controversy] is a watershed. The Marin Arts Council would have thought long and hard indeed—this language comes up when discussing *Dick*—before granting *Dick* $3000. No sooner did they give me the grant than the shit hit the fan. They sought to undb the trouble by claiming that the money was given to the artist, rather than the film; that I was going to spend the money getting my teeth fixed or

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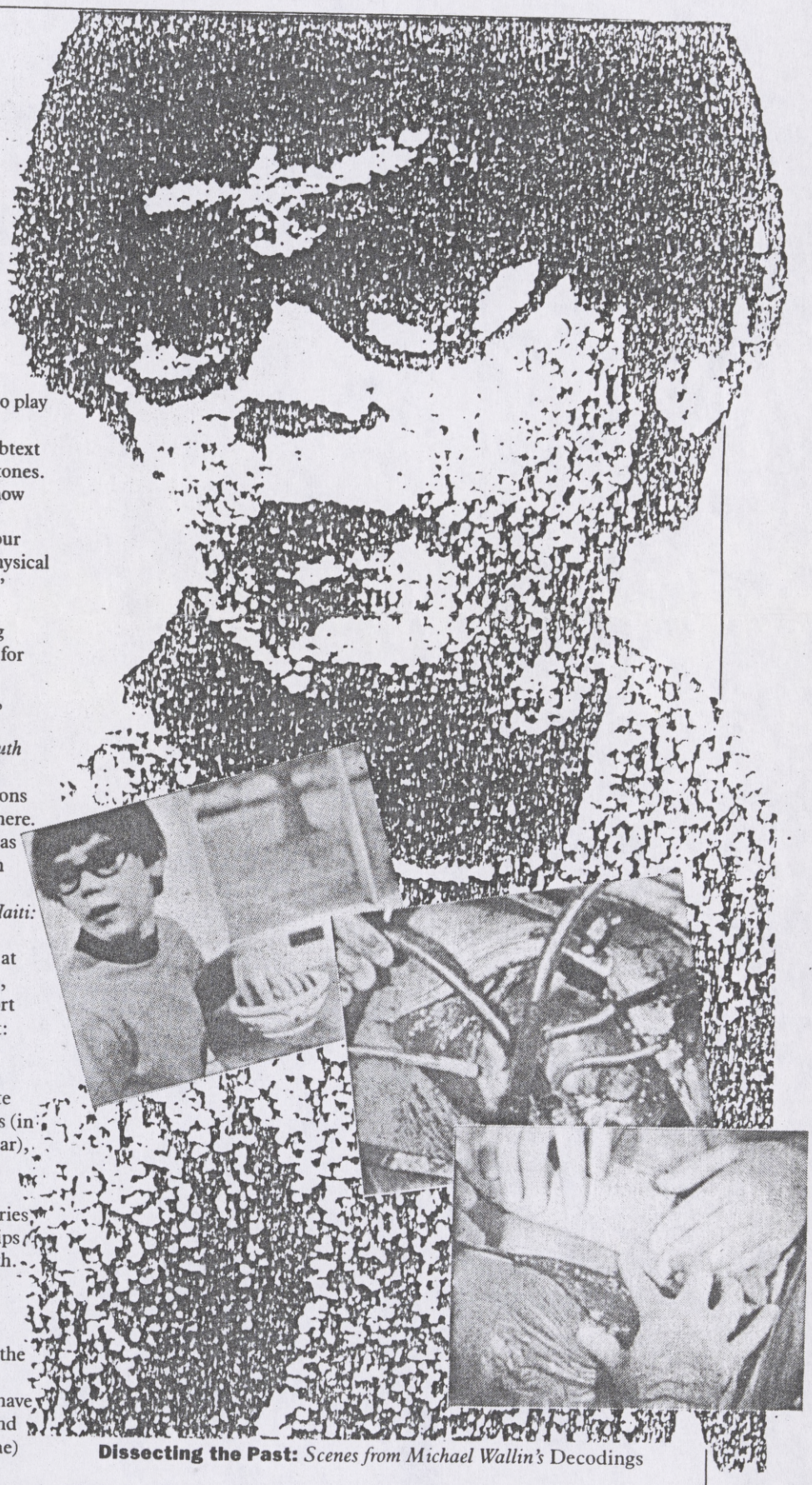

Dissecting the Past: *Scenes from Michael Wallin's* Decodings